

PS
2156
J2
W6+

"Diamond Dick, Jr.'s Mysterious Diagram," in No. 191 of this Library.

DIAMOND-DICK LIBRARY

Entered According to Act of Congress, in the Year 1892, by Street & Smith, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Entered as Second-class Matter in the New York, N. Y., Post Office.

Issued Weekly. Subscription Price, \$2.50 per Year.

July 4, 1896.

No. 192.

STREET & SMITH, Publishers,

NEW YORK.

29 Rose St., N. Y.

5 Cents.

Wild Bill's Last Trail.

By NED BUNTLINE.

Cornell University Library
PS 2156.J2W6

Wild Bill's last trail.



3 1924 022 189 330

010.0ve1



WILD BILL SHOUTED: "GIVE UP THAT HORSE OR DIE!"

Wild Bill's Last Trail.

By NED BUNTLINE,

Author of "HARRY BLOFF, THE REEFER," "NAVIGATOR NED," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE AVENGER.

"Bill! *Wild Bill!* Is this you, or your ghost? What, in great Creation's name, are you doing here?"

"Gettin' toward sunset, old pard—gettin' toward sunset, before I pass in my checks!"

The first speaker was an old scout and plainsman, Sam Chichester by name, and he spoke to a passenger who had just left the west-ward-bound express train at Laramie, on the U. P. R. R. That passenger was none other than J. B. Hickok, or "Wild Bill," one of the most noted shots, and certainly the most desperate man of his age and day west of the Mississippi River.

"What do you mean, Bill, when you talk of passing in your checks? You're in the very prime of life, man, and—"

"Hush! Talk low! There are listening ears everywhere, Sam! I don't know why, but there is a chill at my heart, and I know my time has about run out. I've been on East with Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack, trying to show people what our plains life is. But I wasn't at home there. There were crowds on crowds that came to see us, and I couldn't stir on the streets of their big cities without having an army at my heels, and I got sick of it. But that wasn't all. There was a woman that fell in love with me, and made up her mind to marry me. I told her that I was no sort of a man to tie to—that I was likely to be wiped out any day 'twixt sunrise and sunset, for I had more enemies than a candidate for President; but she wouldn't listen to sense, and so—*we buckled!* Thank Heaven, I've coaxed her to stay East with friends while I've come out here; for, Sam, she'll be a widow inside of six weeks!"

"Bill, you've been hitting benzine heavy of late haven't you?"

"No; I never drank lighter in my life than I have for a year past. But there's a shadow cold as ice on my soul! I've never felt right since I pulled on that red-haired Texan at Abilene, in Kansas. You remember, for you was there. It was kill or get killed, you know, and when I let him have his ticket for a six-foot lot of ground he gave one shriek—it rings in my ears yet. He spoke but one word—'SISTER!' Yet that word has never left my ears, sleeping or waking, from that time to this. I had a sister once myself, Sam, and I loved her a thousand times more than I did life. In fact I never loved life after I lost her. And I can't tell you all about her—I'd choke if I tried. It is enough that she died, and the cause of her death died soon after, and I wasn't far away when—when he went under. But that isn't here nor there, Sam—let's go and warm up. Where do you hang out?"

"I'm in camp close by. I'm heading a party that is bound in for the Black Hills. Captain Jack Crawford is along. You know him. And California Joe, too."

"Good! It is the first streak of luck I've had in a year. I'll join your crowd, Sam, if you'll let me. Captain Jack and Joe are as good friends as I ever had—always barring one."

"And that is?"

"My old six-shooter here. Truth-Teller I call it. It never speaks without saying something. But come, old boy—I see a sign ahead. I must take in a little benzine to wash the car-dust out of my throat."

Bill pointed to a saloon near at hand, and the two old scouts and companions moved toward it.

As they did so, a young man, roughly dressed, with a face fair and smooth, though shadowed as if by exposure to sun and wind, stepped from behind a shade tree, where he had stood while these two talked, listening with breathless interest to every word. His hair, a deep, rich auburn, hung in curling masses clear to his shoulders, and his blue eyes seemed to burn with almost feverish fire as he gazed in the direction the scouts had taken.

"So! He remembers *Abilene*, does he?"

And the tone of the young man was low and fierce as an angered serpent's hiss.

"And he thinks his time is near. So do I. But he shall not die in a second, as his victim did. I would prolong his agonies for years, if every hour was like a living death; a speechless misery. Let him go with Sam Chichester and his crowd. The avenger will be close at hand! His Truth-Teller will lie when he most depends on it. For I—I have sworn that he shall go where he has sent so many victims; go, like them all, unprepared, but not unwarned. No, he thinks that death is near; I'll

freeze the thought to his very soul! He is on the death-trail now! With me rests when and where it shall end."

The face of the young man was almost fiendish in its expression as he spoke. It seemed as if his heart was the concentration of hate and a fell desire for revenge.

He strode along the streets swiftly, and, glancing in at the saloon which the two men had entered, paused one second, with his right hand thrust within his vest, as if clutching a weapon, and debating in his mind whether or not to use it.

A second only he paused, and then muttering, "It is not time yet," he passed on.

He went a little way up the same street and entered a German restaurant. Throwing himself heavily on a seat, he said:

"Give me a steak, quick. I'm hungry and dry. Give me a bottle of the best brandy in your house."

"We've got der steak, und bread, und peer, und Rhein wine, but no prandy," said the German, who kept the place.

"Cook the steak in a hurry, and send for some brandy then!" cried the young man, throwing down a golden eagle. "Your beer and wine are like dishwater to me. I want fire—fire in my veins now!"

"Dunder and blixen! I shouldn't dink as you was want much more fire as dere is in your eyes, young fellow. But I send for your prandy."

The young man threw one glance around the room to see if he were the only occupant.

There was another person there, one who had evidently just come in, a traveler, judging by a good-sized valise that was on the floor beside his chair. This person looked young, for the face, or as much of it as was not hidden by a very full black beard, was fair and smooth as that of a woman; while the hair which shaded his white brow was dark as night, soft and glossy as silk, hanging in short, curling masses about his face and neck.

He was dressed rather better than the usual run of travelers; in a good black broad-cloth suit—wore a heavy gold watch-chain, had on a fine linen shirt, with a diamond pin in the bosom, and appeared to feel quite satisfied with himself, from the cool and easy manner in which he gave his orders for a good, substantial meal, in a voice rather low and musical for one of his apparent age.

The last comer eyed this person very closely, and a smile almost like contempt rose on his face, when the dark-eyed stranger called for claret wine, or if they had not that, for a cup of tea.

But his own strong drink was now brought in, and pouring out a glassful of undiluted brandy he drank it down and muttered:

"That's the stuff! It will keep up the fire. My veins would stiffen without it. It has carried me so far, and it must to the end. Then—no matter!"

The stranger or traveler looked as if wondering that the young man could take such a fearful dose of fiery liquor, and the wonder must have increased when a second glassful was drained before the food was on the table.

But the latter came in now, and the traveler and the young man with auburn hair, at separate tables, were apparently too busy in disposing of the eatables to take any further notice of each other.

When the first had finished, he took a roll of cigarettes from one of his pockets, selected one, took a match from a silver box, drawn from the same pocket, and lighting his cigarette, threw a cloud of smoke above his head.

The second, pouring out his third glass of brandy, sipped it quietly—the first two glasses having evidently supplied the fire he craved so fiercely.

The traveler, as we may call him, for want of any other knowledge, now rose, and as if impelled by natural politeness, tendered a cigarette to the other.

The man with auburn hair looked surprised, and his fierce, wild face softened a little, as he said:

"Thank you, no. I drink sometimes, like a fish, but I don't smoke. Tobacco shakes the nerves, they say, and I want my nerves steady."

"Strong drink will shake them more, I've heard," said the traveler, in his low, musical voice. "But you seem to have a steady hand, though you take brandy as if used to it."

"My hand is steady, stranger," was the reply. "There is not a man on the Rio Grande border, where I came from, that can strike a center at twenty paces with a revolver as often as I. And with a rifle at one hundred yards I can most generally drop a deer with a ball between his eyes, if he is looking at me, or take a wild turkey's head without hurting his body."

"Then, you are from Texas?"

"Yes, sir. And you?"

"From the East, sir. I have traveled in the South—all over, in fact—but my home is in the old Empire State."

"If it isn't impudent, which way are you bound now?"

"I haven't quite decided. I may go to the Black Hills—may remain around here awhile—it seems to be rather a pleasant place."

"Yes, fer them that like it. I'm off for the Black Hills, myself."

"Ah! with a company?"

"Not much! But there's a company going. I'm one of them that don't care much for company, and can take better care of myself alone than with a crowd about me."

"So! Well it is a good thing to be independent. Do you know the party that is going?"

"Some of 'em, by sight. The captain is Sam Chichester, and he has Californian Joe, Cap'n Jack, and about twenty more in his party. And Wild Bill has just come on the train, and I heard him say he was going with the crowd."

"Wild Bill!" cried the stranger, flushing up. "Did you say he was going?"

"Yes."

"Then I'd like to go, too—but I'd like to go with another party, either just before or behind that party. Do you know Wild Bill?"

Know him! Who does not? Hasn't he killed more men than any other white man in the States and Territories—I'll not say how, but is he not a hyena, sopped in blood?"

"You do not like him?"

"Who says I don't?"

"You do! Your eyes flash hate while you speak of him."

"Do they? Well, maybe I don't like him as well as I do a glass of brandy—maybe I have lost some one I loved by his hand. It isn't at all unlikely."

The traveler sighed, and with an anxious look, said:

"You don't bear him any grudge, do you? You wouldn't harm him?"

A strange look passes like a flash over the face of the other; he seemed to read the thoughts or wishes of the traveler in a glance.

"Oh, no," he said, with assumed carelessness. "Accidents will happen in the best families. It's not in me to bear a grudge, because Bill may have wiped out fifteen or twenty Texans, while they were foolin' around in his way. As to harm—he's too ready with his six-shooter, old Truth-Teller, he calls it, to stand in much danger. I'm quick, but he is quicker. You take a good deal of interest in him? Do you know him?"

"Yes; that is, I know him by sight. He is thought a great deal of by an intimate friend of mine, and that is why I feel an interest in him."

"And that friend is a woman?"

"Why do you think so?"

"It is a fancy of mine."

"Well, I will not contradict you. For her sake I would hate to see any evil befall him."

There was a cynical smile on the face of the young man with auburn hair.

"If a woman loved him, she ought not to leave him, for his life is mighty uncertain," said the latter. "I heard him say to Captain Chichester, not half an hour ago, that he didn't believe he would live long, and such a man as he is sure to die with his boots on!"

"Did he say that?" asked the traveler.

"Yes; and he seemed to feel it, too. He had to do as I do, fire up with something strong to get life into his veins."

"Poor fellow! He had better have staid East when he was there, away from this wild and lawless section."

"Stranger, there mayn't be much law out this way, but justice isn't always blind out here. If you stay long enough, you may learn that."

"Very likely; but you spoke of going to those Black Hills."

"Yes, I'm going."

"Will you let me go with you?"

"You don't look much like roughing it, and the trip is not only hard, but it may be dangerous. The redskins are beginning to act wolfish on the plains."

"I think I can stand as much hardship as you. You are light and slender."

"But tough as an old buffalo bull, for all that. I've been brought up in the saddle, with rifle and lasso in hand. I'm used to wind and weather, sunshine and storm—they're all alike to me."

"And Indians?"

"Yes—to Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache. But these Cheyennes and Sioux are a tougher breed, they tell me. I'll soon learn them too, I reckon. There's one thing sure, I don't go in no crowd of twenty or thirty, with wagons or pack mules along

to tempt the cusses with, while they make the travel slow. You want either a big crowd or a very small one, if you travel in an Indian country."

"You have not answered my question yet. Will you let me go through to the Black Hills with you?"

"Why don't you go with the other party? They'll take you, I'll bet."

"I do not want to go where Wild Bill will see me. He may think his wife has sent me as a spy on his movements and actions."

"His wife! Is he married? It must be something new."

"It is. He was married only a short time ago to a woman who almost worships him. She did all she could to keep him from going out into his old life again, but she could not."

"You can go with me!" said the other, abruptly, after a keen and searching look in the traveler's face.

"What is your name?"

"Willie Pond."

"Rather a deep Pond, if I know what water is," said the auburn-haired man, to himself, and then he asked, in a louder tone, "have you horse and arms?"

"No; I just came on the train from the East. But there is money—buy me a good horse, saddle, and bridle. I'll see to getting arms."

And Mr. Willie Pond handed the other a five-hundred dollar treasury note.

"You don't ask my name, and you trust me with money as if you knew I was honest."

"You'll tell me your name when you feel like it!" was the rejoinder. "As to your honesty, if I think you are safe to travel with, you're safe to trust my money with."

"You're right. Your money is safe. As to my name, call me Jack. It is short, if it isn't sweet. Some time I'll tell you the rest of it."

"All right, Jack. Take your own time. And now get all ready to start either ahead or just behind the other party."

"We'll not go ahead. Where will you stay to-night?"

"Wherever you think best."

"All right. This old Dutelman keeps rooms for lodgers. You'd better stay here, and if you don't want Bill to see you, keep pretty close in doors. He'll be out in the Black Hillers' camp, or in the saloons where they sell benzine and run faro banks. Bill is death on cards."

"So I've heard," said Mr. Pond, with a sigh.

Jack now went out, and Pond called the Dutch landlord to him and engaged a room.

CHAPTER II.

PERSIMMON BILL.

As soon as the auburn-haired man who called himself Jack had left the German restaurant, he went to a livery-stable near by, called for his own horse, which was kept there, and the instant it was saddled he mounted, and at a gallop rode westward from the town.

He did not draw rein for full an hour, and then he had covered somewhere between eight and ten miles of ground, following no course or trail, but riding in a course as straight as the flight of an arrow.

He halted then in a small ravine, nearly hidden by a growth of thick brush, and gave a peculiar whistle. Thrice had this sounded, when a man came cautiously out of the ravine, or rather out of its mouth. He was tall, slender, yet seemed to possess the bone and muscle of a giant. His eyes were jet black, fierce and flashing, and his face had a stern, almost classic beauty of feature, which would have made him a model in the ancient age of sculpture. He carried a repeating rifle, two revolvers, and a knife in his belt. His dress was buckskin, from head to foot.

"You are Persimmon Bill?" said Jack, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes. Who are you, and how came you by the signal that called me out?"

"A woman in town gave it to me, knowing she could trust me."

"Was her first name Addie?"

"Her last name was Neidic."

"All right. I see she has trusted you. What do you want?"

"Help in a matter of revenge."

"Good! You can have it. How much help is wanted?"

"I want one man taken from a party, alive, when he gets beyond civilized help, so that I can see him tortured. I want him to die by inches."

"How large is his party, and where are they now?"

"The party numbers between twenty and thirty; they are in camp in the edge of Laramie, and will start for the Black Hills in a few days."

"If all the party are wiped out but the one you want, will it matter to you?"

"No; they are his friends, and as such I hate them!"

"All right. Get me a list of their numbers and names, how armed, what animals and stores they have, every fact, so I can be ready. They will never get more than half way to the Hills, and the one you want shall be delivered, bound, into your hands. All this, and more, will I do for her who sent you here!"

"You love her?"

"She loves me! I'm not one to waste much breath on talking love. My Ogallalla Sioux warriors know me as the soldier-killer. Be cautious when you go back, and give no hint to any one but Addie Neidic that there is a living being in Dead Man's Hollow, for so this ravine is called in there."

"Do not fear. I am safe, for I counsel with no one. I knew Addie Neidic before I came here, met her by accident, revealed myself and wants, and she sent me to you."

"It is right. Go back, and be cautious to give the signal if you seek me, or you might lose your scalp before you saw me."

"My scalp?"

"Yes; my guards are vigilant and rough."

"Your guards?"

Persimmon Bill laughed at the look of wonder in the face of his visitor, and with his hand to his mouth, gave a shrill, warbling cry.

In a second the mouth of the ravine was fairly blocked with armed and painted warriors—Sioux, of the Ogallalla tribe. There were not less than fifty of them.

"You see my guards—red devils, who will do my bidding at all times, and take a scalp on their own account every chance they get," said Persimmon Bill.

Then he took an eagle feather, with its tip dipped in crimson, from the coronet of the chief, and handed it, in the presence of all the Indians, to Jack.

"Keep this, and when out on the plains, wear it in your hat, where it can be seen, and the Sioux will ever pass you unharmed, and you can safely come and go among them. Now go back, get the list and all the news you can, and bring it here as soon as you can. Tell Addie to ride out with you when you come next."

Jack placed the feather in a safe place inside his vest, bowed his head, and wheeling his horse, turned toward the town. Before he had ridden a hundred yards he looked back. Persimmon Bill had vanished, not an Indian was in sight, and no one unacquainted with their vicinity could have seen a sign to show that such dangerous beings were near.

No smoke rose above the trees, no horses were feeding around, nothing to break the apparent solitude of the scene.

"And that was Persimmon Bill?" muttered the auburn-haired rider, as he galloped back. "So handsome, it does not seem as if he could be the murderer they call him. And yet, if all is true, he has slain tens, where Wild Bill has killed one. No matter, he will be useful to me. That is all I care for now."

CHAPTER III.

A WARNING.

When Wild Bill and Sam Chichester entered the saloon alluded to in our first chapter, they were hailed by several jovial-looking men, one of whom Wild Bill warmly responded to as California Joe, while he grasped the hand of another fine-looking young man whom he called Captain Jack.

"Come, Crawford," said he, addressing the last named, "let's wet up! I'm dry as an empty powder-horn!"

"No benzine for me, Bill," replied Crawford, or "Captain Jack." "I've not touched a drop of the poison in six months."

"What? Quit drinking, Jack? Is the world coming to an end?"

"I suppose it will sometime. But that has nothing to do with my drinking. I promised old Cale Durg to quit, and I've done it. And I never took a better trail in my life. I'm fresh as a daisy, strong as a full-grown elk, and happy as an antelope on a wide range."

"All right, Jack. But I must drink. Come, boys—all that will—come up and wet down at my expense."

California Joe and most of the others joined in the invitation, and Captain Jack took a cigar rather than "lift a shingle from the roof," as he said.

"Where are you bound, Bill?" asked Captain Jack, as Bill placed his empty glass on the counter, and turned around.

"To the Black Hills with your crowd—that is if I live to get there."

"Live! You haven't any thought of dying, have you? I never saw you look better."

"Then I'll make a healthy-looking corpse, Jack. For I tell you my time is nearly up; I've felt it in my bones this six months. I've seen ghosts in my dreams, and felt as if they were around me when I was awake. It's no use, Jack, when a chap's time comes he has got to go."

"Nonsense, Bill; don't think of anything like that. A long life and a merry one—that's my motto. We'll go out to the Black Hills, dig out our fortunes, and then get out of the wilderness to enjoy life."

"Boy, I've never known the happiness outside of the wilderness that I have in it. What you kill there is what was made for killing—the food we need. What one kills among civilization is only too apt to be of his own kind."

And Bill shuddered as if he thought of the many he had sent into untimely graves.

"Stuff, Bill! You're half-crazed by your dramatic trip. You've acted so much, that reality comes strange. Let's go out to camp and have a talk about what is ahead of us."

"Not till I buy a horse, Jack. I want a good horse under me once more; I've ridden on cars and steamboats till my legs ache for a change."

"There's a sale's stable close by. Let's go and see what stock is there," said Sam Chichester.

"Agreed!" cried all hands, and soon Bill and his friends were at the stable, looking at some dozen or more horses which were for sale.

"There's the beauty I want," said Wild Bill, pointing to a black horse, full sixteen hands high, and evidently a thoroughbred. "Name your price, and he is my meat!"

"That horse isn't for sale now. He was spoken for an hour ago, or maybe less, by a cash customer of mine—a red-haired chap from Texas."

"Red-haired chap from Texas!" muttered Bill. "Red-haired cusses from Texas are always crossin' my trail. That chap from Abilene was a Texas cattle-man, with hair as red as fire. Where is your cash customer, Mr. Liveryman?"

"Gone out riding somewhere," replied the stable-keeper.

"When he comes back, tell him Wild Bill wants that horse, and I reckon he'll let Wild Bill buy him, if he knows when he is well off! I wouldn't give two cusses and an amen for all the rest of the horses in your stable; I want *him!*"

"I'll tell Jack," said the stableman; "but I don't think it will make much odds with him. He has as good as bought the horse, for he offered me the money on my price, but I couldn't change his five hundred-dollar treasury note. It'll take more than a name to scare him. He always goes fully armed."

"You tell him what I said, and that I'm a-coming here at sunset for that horse," said Bill, and he strode away, followed by his crowd.

An hour later the auburn-haired man from Texas reined in his own horse, a fiery mustang from his own native plains in front of the stable.

Though the horse was all afoam with sweat, showing that it had been ridden far and fast, it did not pant or show a sign of weariness. It was of a stock which will run from rise of sun to its going down, and yet plunge forward in the chill of the coming night.

"You want the Black Hawk horse you spoke for this morning, don't you?" asked the stableman, as Jack dismounted.

"Of course I do. I've got the change; there is his price. Three hundred dollars you said?"

"Yes; but there's been a chap here looking at that horse who told me to tell you his name, and that he intended to take that horse. I told him a man had bought it, but he said: 'Tell him Wild Bill wants it, and that Wild Bill will come at sunset to take it.'"

"He will?"

It was hissed rather than spoken, while the young Texan's face grew white as snow, his blue eyes darkening till they seemed almost black.

"He will! Let him try it! A sudden death is too good for the blood-stained wretch! But if he will force it on, why let it come. The horse is bought: let him come at sunset if he dares!"

And the young man handed the stable-keeper three one hundred-dollar greenback notes.

CHAPTER IV.

"GIVE UP THAT HORSE, OR DIE!"

Leaving the livery-stable, the young Texan went directly to the German restaurant, and asked for Willie Pond.

He was shown up to the room, recently engaged by the traveler, and found him engaged in cleaning a pair of fine, silver-mounted Remington revolvers.

"Getting ready, I see," said the Texan. "I have bought you

a horse—the best in this whole section; I gave three hundred dollars. There is your change.”

“Keep the two hundred to buy stores with for our trip,” said Pond.

“No need of it I’ve laid in all the stores we need. You can buy yourself a couple of blankets and an India-rubber for wet weather. A couple of tin cans of pepper and salt is all that I lay in when I’m going to rough it on the plains. The man that can’t kill all the meat he needs isn’t fit to go there.”

“Maybe you’re right. The less we are burdened the better for our horses. Are we likely to meet Indians on the route?”

“None that will hurt *me*—or you, when you’re in my company. The Sioux know me and will do me no harm.”

“That is good. The Indians were my only dread.”

“I’ve a favor to ask.”

“It is granted before you ask it—what is it?”

“I want to break your horse to the saddle before you try it. You are not so used to the saddle, I reckon, as I am. I will take a ride at sunset, and bring him around here for you to look at.”

“That is right. I am only thankful to have you ride him first, though you may find me a better rider than you think.”

“Perhaps. But he looks wild, and I like to tame *will* uns. I’ll have him here between sundown and dark.”

“All right. I told you I’d see to getting arms. I had these revolvers, and cartridges for them, but I want a light repeating rifle. Get me a good one, with as much ammunition as you think I’ll need.”

“All right. I’ll get a new model Winchester. They rattle out lead faster than any other tool I ever carried.”

The Texan now left. He had not spoken of Wild Bill’s desire to possess that horse, because he had an idea that Mr. Willie Pond would weaken, and give up the horse, rather than risk bloodshed for its possession. And perhaps he had another idea—a mysterious one, which we do not care to expose at this stage of the story.

The young Texan hastened from the German restaurant to a small, neat house in the outskirts of the town. Knocking in a very peculiar manner, he was admitted at once by a tall and strikingly beautiful young woman, whom he addressed as if well acquainted with her.

“I’m here, Addie, and I’ve seen *him*.”

“You found him all right, when you told him who sent you, did you not?” asked the lady, leading the way to a sitting-room in the rear of the cottage.

“Yes, ready to do anything for one you recommed.”

“Poor Bill! A braver man and a truer friend never lived. He loves me, and I fear it will be his ruin, for he will too often come within the reach of those who would destroy him, if they only knew where and how to reach him. Persecution and cruelty placed him on the bloody path he has had to follow, and now—now he is an outlaw, beyond all chance for mercy, should he ever be taken.”

“He never will be taken, guarded as he is.”

“You saw his guards, then?”

“Yes, forty or fifty of them, and I would rather have them as friends than foes. He wants you to ride out with me to meet him when I go next with some information that he needs.”

“When will that be?” asked the lady.

“In the early morning, or perhaps to-night, if nothing happens to me between now and sunset to make it unnecessary.”

“Between now and sunset? That is within two hours. Do you anticipate any danger?”

“Not much. I have a little task before me. I have a horse to break, and a man known as Wild Bill to tame.”

“Wild Bill!—the dead-shot, the desperado, who has killed at least one man for every year of his life?”

“Yes, the same. But ask me no more questions now. After I have tamed him I will report—or, if he has settled me, there will be no need of it.”

“Do not run this risk.”

“It must be done. He has, in a manner, defied me, and I accept his defiance.”

“Surely he does not know—”

“No, he knows nothing of what you would say if I did not interrupt you. Nor do I intend he shall at present. It is enough that *you* know it, and will care for both my body and my good name, should I fall.”

“You know I will. But you must not fall.”

“I do not intend to. I think I can crush him by a look and a word. I shall try, at least. If all goes well, I will be here by eight to-night to arrange for our visit.”

“I hope you will come, and safely.”

“I will, Addie. Until the cup of vengeance is full, Heaven will surely spare me. But I must go. I have no time to spare.”

The young Texan glanced at the chambers of a handsome six-

shooter which he carried, to see if it was ready for use, replaced it in his belt, and then, with a cheerful smile, left the room and house.

Hastening to the stable, he selected a saddle, lengthened the stirrups to suit himself, took a stout bridle from among a lot hanging in the store-room, (and accompanied by the stable-keeper, approached the newly purchased Black Hawk horse.

“I may as well have him ready,” he said; “for if Wild Bill is to be here at sunset, that time is close at hand. You say the horse has not been ridden?”

“No,” said the stable-keeper. “My regular breaker was not here when I bought him. Black Joe tried to mount him, but the horse scared him.”

“Well, I’ll soon see what he is made of, if I can get saddle and bridle on him,” said the Texan.

They now together approached the large box stall in which the stallion was kept. The horse, almost perfect in symmetry, black as night, with a fierce, wild look, turned to front them as they approached the barred entrance.

“Steady, boy—steady!” cried the Texan, as he sprang lightly over the bars, and at once laid his hand on the arched neck of the horse.

To the wonder of the stableman, the horse, instead of rearing back or plunging at the intruder, turned his eyes upon him, and with a kind of tremor in his frame, seemed to wait to see what his visitor meant.

“So! Steady, Black Hawk! steady, old boy!” continued the Texan, kindly passing his hand over the horse’s neck and down his face.

The horse uttered a low neigh, and seemed by his looks pleased with his attentions.

“That beats me!” cried the stable-keeper. “Old Joe had to lasso him and draw him down to a ringbolt before he could rub him off.”

“Hand me the saddle and bridle,” said the Texan, still continuing to “pet” the beautiful and spirited animal.

In a few seconds, without difficulty, the same kind and skillful hands had the horse both saddled and bridled.

The Texan now led the horse out on the street, where quite a crowd seemed to be gathering, perhaps drawn there by some rumor of a fight in embryo.

And as he glanced up the street the Texan saw Wild Bill himself, with his six-shooters in his belt, come striding along, with California Joe and a dozen more at his heels.

In a second, the Texan vaulted upon the back of the horse, which made one wild leap that would have unseated most riders, and then reared on its hind legs as if it would fall back and crush its would-be master.

At this instant, Wild Bill rushing forward, pistol in hand, shouted:

“Give up that horse, or die!”

CHAPTER V.

A SQUARE BACK-DOWN.

The Texan paid no heed to the words of the desperado, but bending forward on the horse with his full weight, drove his spurs deeply into its flanks. Startled and stung with pain, the noble animal, at one wild bound, leaped far beyond where Bill, and his friends stood, and in a second more sped in terrific leaps along the street.

“The cowardly cuss is running away!” yelled Bill derisively.

“It is false! He is *no* coward! He will tame the horse first and then *you*!” cried a voice so close that Bill turned in amazement to see who dare thus to speak to *him*, the “*Terror of the West*.”

“A woman!” he muttered, fiercely, as he saw a tall and queenly-looking girl standing there, with flashing eyes, which did not drop at his gaze.

“Yes—a woman, who has heard of Wild Bill, and neither fears nor admires him!” she said, undauntedly.

“Is the fellow that rode off on the horse your husband or lover that you take his part?” asked Bill, half angrily and half wondering at the temerity of the lovely girl who thus braved his anger.

“He is neither,” she replied, scornfully.

“I’m glad of it. I shall not make you a widow or deprive you of a future husband when he comes under my fire, if he should be fool enough to come back.”

“He comes now. See for yourself. He has tamed the horse—now comes *your* turn, coward and braggart!”

Bill was white with anger; but she was a woman, and no matter what he felt, too well he knew the chivalry of the far West to raise a hand or even speak a threatening word to her. But he heard men around him murmur her name.

It was Addie Neidic.

And then he turned his eyes upon the black horse and rider. The animal, completely under control, though flecked with foam, came down the street slowly and gently, bearing his rider with an air of pride rather than submission. As he passed the German restaurant, the rider raised his hat in salutation to Willie Pond, who stood in his window, and said, in a cheerful voice:

"Remain in your room. I have news for you and will be there soon."

Without checking his horse the rider kept on until he was within half a length of the horse of Wild Bill, then checking the animal, he said, in a mocking tone:

"You spoke to me just as I rode away. I've come back to hear you out."

What was the matter with Wild Bill? He stood staring wildly at the Texan, his own face white as if a mortal fear had come upon him.

"Where have I seen that face before?" he gasped. "Can the dead come back to life?"

The Texan bent forward till his own face almost touched that of Wild Bill and hissed out one word in a shrill whisper:

"Sister!"

It was all he said, but the instant Wild Bill heard it, he shrieked out:

"'Tis him—'tis him I shot at Abilene!" and with a shuddering groan he sank senseless to the pavement.

In an instant Bill's friends, who had looked in wonder at this strangescene, sprang to his aid, and, lifting his unconscious form, carried it into the saloon where Bill had met Californian Joe, Captain Jack, and the rest of their crowd.

Left alone, the young Texan said a few words to Addie Neidic, then dismounted and told the stable-keeper to keep that horse saddled and bridled, and to get his own Texan mustang ready for use.

"I must be out of town before sunrise, or Wild Bill and his friends may have questions to ask that I don't want to answer just now," he said.

And then he walked a little way with Miss Neidic, talking earnestly. But soon he left her, and while she kept on in the direction of her own house, he turned and went to the German restaurant.

Entering the room of Willie Pond, he said, abruptly:

"If you want to go to the Black Hills with me on your own horse we'll have to leave this section mighty sudden. Wild Bill has set his mind on having the horse I bought and broke for you, and he has a rough crowd to back him up."

"If I had known Bill wanted the horse so badly I could have got along with another," said Pond, rather quietly.

"What! let him have that horse? Why it hasn't its equal on the plains or in the mountains. It is a thoroughbred—a regular racer, which a sporting man was taking through to the Pacific coast on speculation. He played fero, lost, got broke, and put the horse up for a tenth of its value. I got him for almost nothing compared to his worth. On that horse you can keep out of the way of any red who scours the plains. If you don't want him I do, for Wild Bill shall never put a leg over his back!"

"I'll keep him. Don't get mad. I'll keep him and go whenever you are ready," said Pond, completely mastered by the excitement which the young Texan exhibited.

"Well, we'll get the horses out of town and in a safe place to-night. And for yourself, I'll take you to the house of a lady friend of mine to stay to-night and to-morrow, and by to-morrow night I'll know all I want to about the movements of the other party, and we can move so as to be just before or behind them, as you and I will decide best."

"All right, Jack. I leave it to you. Are you sure the horse will be safe for me to ride?"

"Yes. A horse like that once broken is broken for life. They never forget their first lesson. A mongrel breed, stupid, resentful, and tricky, is different. Be ready to mount when I lead him around. I will send for your traveling-bag, and you will find it at the house where we stop."

"I will be ready," said Pond.

The Texan now left, and Pond watched him as he hurried off to the stable.

"The man hates Wild Bill with a deadly hatred!" he murmured. "I must learn the cause. Perhaps it is a providence that I have fallen in with him, and I have concluded to keep his company to the Black Hills. But I must call the landlord and close up my account before the other comes back with the horses."

The German was so put out by the sudden giving up of a room, which he hoped to make profitable, that he asked an extra day's rent, and to his surprise, got it.

CHAPTER VI.

OFF TO THE HILLS.

It was some time before Wild Bill became fully conscious after he was carried into the saloon, and when he did come to he raved wildly about the red-haired man he shot in Abilene, and insisted it was his ghost, and not a real man, he had seen.

Bill's friends tried to cheer and reassure him, and got several stiff draughts of liquor down his throat, which finally "set him up," as they said, till he began to look natural. But he still talked wildly and strangely.

"I told you, Joe," he said to his old friend; "I told you my time was nigh up. This hasn't been my first warning. That Abilene ghost has been before me a thousand times, and he has hissed that same word, 'sister,' in my ear."

"Bah! old boy. What's the use of your talking fooliah. You've seen no ghost. That red-haired chap was as live as you are."

"He did have red hair and blue eyes, then?"

"Yea; but there are lots of such all over the world. Red hair and blue eyes generally travel in company. But he was nothing to scare you. You could have wiped him out with one back-handed blow of your fist, let alone usin' shootin' irons, of which there wasn't 'casion, seein' he didn't draw."

"Where is he now?"

"I'll go and see. I suppose he is over at the stable."

Joe went out, but soon returned to say that the Texan had just ridden off, after paying his bill; the stable-keeper did not know where.

"Let him go," murmured Bill. "If he is a man, and not a ghost, I wouldn't raise a hand to hurt him, not for all the gold in the Black Hills. He was so like—so like the chap I dropped in Abilene!"

Bill took another drink, but it seemed as if nothing could lift the gloom which weighed down his heart. Only once did his face brighten. That was when Sam Chichester said there was no use hanging on at Laramie any longer for a bigger crowd; they were strong enough now, and would start for the Hills inside of four-and-twenty hours.

"That's the talk for me!" cried Bill. "I want to get out of here as soon as I can, Joe, and pick me out some sort of a horse. I don't care what, so it'll carry me to the Hills. I can't breathe free any longer where there's such a lot of folks."

"I'll get you a first-chop horse, Bill," said Joe. "There's some half-breeds in a corral just out of town, as tough as grizzlies, and heavy enough for your weight or mine."

"I don't weigh down as I did," said Bill, with a sigh. "I've been losin' weight for six months back. No matter. It'll be less trouble to tote me when I go under. Remember, boys, when I do, bury me with my boots on, just as I die."

"Stop your clatter about dyin', Bill. I'm sick o' that kind of talk. It's time enough to talk of death when its clutch is on you."

"I can't help it, Joe, old pard. It keeps a stickin' in my throat, and if it didn't come out, I'd choke."

"Let's go to camp," said Chichester. "Can you walk now, Bill?"

"Yes."

And the party rose, took a parting drink with the landlord, and started for camp.

Outside, Bill gave a startled, wild glance toward the spot where he had seen the Texan; but no one was there now, and he moved on with his companions toward their camp, listening to, but not joining in their conversation.

On arriving at camp, Chichester, as captain, gave orders that each man should report on paper, or verbally, so it could be taken down, just how much ammunition he had, the number and kind of his arms, private stores, etc., so that if there was not enough to make the trip safely, more could be provided. The number and condition of horses, pack-mules, etc., was also to be given.

No man would be fitted to lead such a party did he not consider and post himself fully in all these particulars.

Quite a crowd of townspeople followed the party out, for the news soon spread that they intended to leave in a short time; so around their blazing camp-fire there were many visitors. Toward these Wild Bill cast many a stealthy glance, but he did not see the red-haired Texan there.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OUTLAW'S LOVE.

Willie Pond was much surprised when he found that his ride only extended to a small but pretty cottage just on the outskirts of the town, where the young Texan, introducing him to Miss Neidic as his temporary hostess, left him while he took the horses to a safe place of concealment not far away.

Miss Neidie took her new visitor into the rear sitting-room, and while giving him a cordial welcome, and passing the usual salutations, scanned him with a keen and critical eye. The impression left must have been rather favorable, for the lady seemed to feel none of the embarrassment usual when strangers hold a first interview, but talked on as easily and naturally as if she had known him half a lifetime.

"How long have you been in town, Mr. Pond?" was one of her many questions.

"Only a day. I arrived on the express, westward bound, which passed this morning," was the answer.

"Why, that was the same train the desperado, Wild Bill came on."

"Yes, he was pointed out to me by the conductor. But why do you call him a desperado?"

"Because that is his character."

"I thought none but outlaws were called desperadoes."

"There is where the mistake comes in. Most outlaws are desperadoes, but a man can be a desperado, and yet not an outlaw. If to be always ready to shoot for a look or a word—whether his opponent is ready or not—is not being a desperado, I do not know what is. But excuse me. He may be a friend of yours."

"Oh, no," said Pond, with some confusion in his manner. "But a very dear friend of mine married him not long since, and for her sake I feel a sort of interest in the man. I fancied that he was rather wild when under the influence of liquor, but for all, a brave and generous man, when truly himself."

"Brave, as brutes are, when he feels he has the power to kill in his hands; but generous? Never!" said Miss Neidie.

"You are his enemy."

"No; for he has never done me, personally, an injury; but he has injured friends of mine—sent more than one down to untimely graves."

"There, I said it—you are his enemy, because of what he has done to your friends."

"I am not his friend, nor do I wish to be the friend of such a man. But the enmity of a woman is nothing to him. He looks for friends among such men as he now consorts with—California Joe, Sam Chichester, and that crowd. I know but one real gentleman in the party, and that one is Jack Crawford."

"I know none of them."

"You lose nothing, then, for it is little honor one gains by such acquaintances. They suit Wild Bill, for they drink, gamble, and shoot on little cause; they are ready for any adventure, never stopping to count risks or look back when evil is commenced or ruin wrought, no matter what may be its nature."

The entrance of the young Texan now caused a change in the topic of conversation.

"I have learned when that party starts," he said. "They are making their final preparations to-night, and will break camp in the morning early enough to make Twenty-mile Creek for their first night's halt—probably about ten o'clock."

"Do you propose to go ahead of them?" asked Pond.

"No; it will be more easy and safe to follow their trail. They will not have over fifty animals all told, and there will be lots of feed left for us, even if we keep close by. And we can get as much game as we need any time, for we can use but little. One pack-horse will carry all our stuff, and still be able to travel at speed, if need be."

"You understand it better than I," said Pond. "Arrange things to suit yourself, and I will conform to your plans."

"All right. You had better turn in early, so as to get a good rest. For after we are out, long rides and night-watches will tell on you, for you are not used to them."

"I will show you to a chamber. Your valise is already in it," said Miss Neidie.

Mr. Pond followed her, and the Texan was left alone to his thoughts, which he carelessly expressed aloud.

"So far all works well," he said. "Mr. Willie Pond is as soft as mush; but I've read him through and through. He wouldn't go with me if he didn't think he'd have a chance to serve Wild Bill, for, though he shuns Bill, he thinks more of Bill than he would have me think. I'll bet Addie has found that out."

"Found out what?" said the lady herself, who had returned so noiselessly that Jack had not heard her.

"That Mr. Pond, as he calls himself, is a friend of Wild Bill's."

"All of that, and maybe something more, as you may find out before you are through your trip."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing but this—keep your eyes open, and study your Mr. Pond closely."

"There is nothing dangerous about him?"

Miss Neidie laughed heartily.

"Nothing very dangerous to you, at any rate," she said; "but if they all go in the morning, we must see Persimmon Bill to-night."

"That is so. Shall I bring the horses round?"

"No. We might be overheard. I will go to the stables. Get the horses ready. I have some things to put up for Bill, and I will come as soon as I pack them in a pair of saddle-bags."

Jack now left for the stable, and Miss Neidie, with a woman's forethought, began to gather up many little things which might be useful to her outlaw lover, who had little chance to procure articles of comfort, not to speak of luxury, except when on some raid in the settlements."

In ten minutes she was ready and on her way to the stables.

Jack had her own favorite horse saddled, while for himself he chose the Black Hawk beauty.

In a few seconds both were mounted, and in the darkness they sped away over the same route which Jack had taken when he went to visit Persimmon Bill.

Little was said as they rode on, for the horses were kept at a swift gallop, and before the hour was up they had approached the ravine as near as they deemed safe before giving the signal.

Scarcely was it given before it was answered, and a second later Persimmon Bill himself was by the side of Addie Neidie's horse, and she was pressed to the outlaw's bosom with a fervor that showed he had a heart more than half-human left in his breast.

"It's kind of you, Addie, to come out here in the chill of the night to see a wild cuss like me, outlawed by man, and forsaken by Heaven!"

"It's safer to come by night than by day, for you and for me, Bill," she said. "And I couldn't bear you should go away again till I had seen you. And I've brought you a lot of things I know you'll need."

"I shall not need much of anything, Addie, on the trail I'm soon to take. Your friend here I know is safe, or I wouldn't say so much. But the truth is, the reds are going to rise in a body all over the north and northwest, and we'll sweep the Black Hills, and clean out every 'blue-coat' that is sent to cheek the rising. The Sioux have made me a big chief, and I'll have my hands full. If you hear of the 'White Elk,' as second only to Sitting Bull himself, you'll know who it is."

"You, of course!"

"Yes, Addie; that is the name they have given me. And if the Sioux fight as I think they will, and all the northern tribes join, we'll force a treaty that will give us all the Black Hills and the Yellowstone, Powder River, and Big Horn Country for ourselves forever. Then, my girl, and not till then, can I make a safe home for you, and not till then will I ask you to be my wife. For then the outlaw will be safe, and can live in peace, and look for days of home and happiness."

"Bill, when you ask it, be it in peace or war, I am yours. You are brave as the bravest, and had you never been treated wrongfully, would not now be a hunted outlaw. I love you, and you know it."

"Yes, Addie, and I love you too well to ask you to share my lot till I can see some sunshine. But this stranger has news for me."

Persimmon Bill turned to the Texan, who had drawn his horse away a little, so as not to intrude on the conversation between the lovers.

"I have the news you asked for," said Jack. "The party, all told, who will start at nine or ten in the morning, and camp twenty miles out to-morrow, number twenty-nine men, all well armed, the most of them with repeating rifles and six-shooters. Half of them are old scouts, the rest are miners, gamblers, and a couple of them are traders. They have fifty animals, saddle and pack, and carry no wagons. The mules are loaded pretty heavy, at least them that belong to the traders, and are well worth capture."

"All right. And there is one of the party you don't want hurt until he is in your hands?"

"Yes, that man is Wild Bill. I want him in my power, so that I may see him die slowly, surely, awfully!"

"There is another man in that party, Bill, who mustn't be hurt. He did me a kindness once, down at Cheyenne—saved me from insult and wrong. His name is Crawford—Captain Jack, they call him."

"Yes, I know him. No harm shall befall him, if I can help it."

"Thank you, Bill; you needn't be jealous of him, for it is only what he did that makes me ask a favor for him."

"I know it, Addie."

"No woman on earth can make me jealous of you. I've too much confidence in your truth and love. But you'll not attack the party anywhere near here?"

"No, not till they are far beyond all the military posts. I want no pursuit when I do my work. Our animals are in good order for the war-path now, and I want to keep them so. I'm drilling my braves at every chance, so as to fit them to meet such

men as Crook, Custer, and Carr. All they want is drill and discipline to make them the best soldiers in the world, and they're coming into it finely."

"Well, you were a soldier yourself long enough to know all that should be done."

"A soldier too long, girl—too long a slave to men who held authority only to abuse it," said Bill, in a bitter tone. "The cruelty exercised on me then turned my best blood to gall, and made me what I am. I hate the name, and my blood boils beyond all restraint when my eye falls upon a uniform. Rightly have the Sioux called me the "Soldier Killer," for never do I let one who wears the button escape if he comes within my reach. But you must not stay too long. Good-night—I will not say good-by, for we will meet again."

"Good-night, Bill."

"One word to your friend here," added the outlaw. "Follow the trail of Chichester, about three hours back, whenever he moves. I will probably, for three or four days, be about as far behind you. On the night of the third or fourth day out, or, if it is bad weather for travel, a day or two later, I will surround you, and take you and your friend prisoners, to all appearances. But of course no harm will come to you, and you will be free when the other work is done. Then I will close up and wipe out Chichester's gang, saving the two who are to be spared. Then I will be ready for the war-path, for I need the arms and ammunition these people have to finish arming the drilled marines who are specially under me."

"All right, sir; we understand each other," said the Texan, wheeling his horse to take the back trail.

Addie Neidic, as if from some uncontrollable reason, turned once more toward her lover, and bending from her saddle, threw her arms about his tall and splendid form, and kissed him again and again with passionate tenderness.

"Do be careful of your life, dear Bill," she said. "You are all in all to me. If you perish, life will be valueless to me."

"Addie, I'll try to live for your sake, and work my uttermost to achieve what will give you and me peace and quiet in the end. Good-night, once more—good-night, my beautiful, my own."

"Good night, Bill—God bless you!" she sobbed, as she turned her horse, and followed the Texan at a gallop.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOILED BY A WOMAN.

It was their last night in town before breaking up camp, and the Black Hillers, as they already called themselves, under Chichester, were determined to have a lively time of it.

"They commenced "wetting up," or pouring down liquid lightning in camp, but, being reminded that what they used there would be missed on their journey, they started to skin the saloons in town, and finish out their spree where it would not diminish their own stores.

As Wild Bill said, they were going where money would be of little account, if all the stories about the gold to be found were true; so what they spent now they wouldn't have to carry. And they went in, as such reckless men generally do, spending their money as freely as they could, and drinking with a "looseness" that promised headaches on the morrow, if nothing more.

Wild Bill went in on the spree with a rush, as if he wished to drown the remembrance of his late fright, and despite the cautions of his friend, Captain Jack, who strove hard to keep him within bounds.

California Joe of course was in his element, and in a little while all the party became so turbulent that Crawford left them in disgust. For, as Addie Neidic had said of him, despite his associations, he was a gentleman.

By midnight every saloon had been visited, and many of them pretty well cleaned out, and now Bill proposed to go and break a faro bank that some of the party spoke of.

"I have seven hundred dollars left out of a thousand my woman gave me before I started," said he. "I'll lose that, or break the bank; see if I don't."

All of the party who were sober enough went with Bill, and soon he was before the green board.

Without even waiting to get the run of the game, he planked a hundred dollars on the king, and lost. Without a word, he put two hundred dollars more on the same card, and won. He left the four hundred down, and in another turn he had eight hundred.

"Luck is with me, boys!" he shouted. "I'll break the bank! Let her swing for the king once more, Mr. Dealer!"

To the wonder of all, though it was the last turn of the cards, the king won, and Wild Bill picked up sixteen hundred dollars.

His friends now urged him to quit, but the demon of the game

had entered his soul, and he swore, with a terrible oath, that he would play till he broke the bank, or was broke himself.

A new pack was now put in the box, and once more the dealer cried out:

"Make your bets, gentlemen—make your bets! The game is ready!"

Bill, with a reckless bravado, as much of rum as of his own nature, again laid all his winnings on one card—this time the queen. And with wonderful luck—it could be nothing else—he again doubled his pile, this time his gains being thirty-two hundred dollars.

"Stop now, Bill!" cried California Joe. "This can't last!"

"It shall last! The bank can't stand more than two more such pulls!" shouted Bill, wildly.

And again on the same card he staked his entire winnings.

The dealer and banker were one; he turned pale, but when all bets were down, he pulled his cards without a tremor in his hand. But a groan broke from his lips as the queen once more came out on the winning side.

Once more Bill's stakes were doubled, and this time he changed his card.

The banker hesitated. His capital would hardly cover the pile if Bill won again.

"Keep on," whispered a voice in his ear; "if he breaks you, I'll stake your bank."

The banker looked up and saw, though she was disguised in male attire, a face he well knew. It was that of Addie Neidic, and he knew she was able to keep her word.

Wild Bill had heard the whisper, and his face was white with rage, for he thought the bank would succumb before it would risk another chance with his wonderful luck.

But he let his money lay where he put it, and cried out to the banker to go on with his game if he dared.

The latter, with firm set lips, cried out:

"Game ready, gentlemen—game ready."

The cards were drawn, and once more Wild Bill had won.

Coolly, as if money was no more than waste paper, Bill gathered up the pile, and began to thrust it away in his pockets, when the disguised woman, Addie Neidic, thrust a roll of thousand-dollar notes into the hands of the banker, and cried out:

"This bank is good for fifty thousand dollars. Let no braggart go away and say he has bluffed the bank, till he breaks it!"

Wild Bill trembled from head to foot.

"I know you!" he hissed. "You are the woman who bluffed me at the livery-stable. I'll win your fifty thousand dollars, and then blow the top of any man's head off who'll take your part!"

"Play, don't boast; put up your money!" was the scornful reply.

In an instant Bill put every dollar he had won, every cent he had in the world, and a gold watch on top of that, on the Jack.

Not another man around the table made a bet. A pin could have been heard, had it fallen to the floor, so complete was the silence.

The banker cried out, "Game ready," and slowly drew the cards.

"Jack loses!" he cried, a second after, and Bill's pile, watch and all, was raked in.

"Devil! woman or not, you shall die for this!" he shouted, and his hand went to his belt.

But even as his hand touched his pistol, he heard that fearful whisper, "sister," and saw a white face, wreathed in auburn hair rise over Addie Neidic's shoulder, and with a groan, or a groaning cry of terror, he fell back insensible to the floor.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GHOST AGAIN APPEARS.

When Wild Bill fell, the banker declared his game closed for the night; and while Bill's friends gathered about him and sought to bring him to, the woman, Addie Neidic, took up her money, and left by the rear entrance, and the banker, with two or three of his friends, escorted her home, fearing Bill and his gang might annoy her, if the latter came to before she reached her residence.

The auburn-haired Texan did not go with her, but with a slouched hat drawn over his head, and a Mexican blanket over his shoulders, stood back in a corner, unobserved, to hear Bill's words when he came to, and to see what next would appear on the desperado's programme.

"That ghost again! He came to break my luck."

These were the first words that Wild Bill spoke, when recovering his consciousness; he glared out upon the crowd with blood-shot eyes.

"It was a woman who broke your luck. Addie Neidic backed the bank, or 't would have given in," cried another.

"Who is Addie Neidic?" asked Bill, with a wondering gaze.

"Oh! I remember—the woman who called me a coward over at the livery-stable. Who is she? Where does she live?"

"In a cottage west of town. They say she's rich! Let's go and clean out her crib!" cried a ruffian who did not belong to Bill's party, but most likely held some spite against Miss Neidie.

"Ay! That's the word! Let's clean out the house and set fire to it!" cried another, a chum of the first speaker.

It required but a leader now to set the vile work going. And Wild Bill, gradually recovering his reason, but mad with drink, and just realizing that every dollar he had, and even his watch was gone, was just the man for such a leader.

"I'll go! Show me the house, and we'll teach her to wear her own clothes, and let men's games alone!" shouted Wild Bill.

In a moment fifty men were ready to go; but first they made an onslaught on the wines and liquors on the sideboard of the gambling-room.

While they were madly pouring these down, the auburn-haired Texan slipped from the room, and ran swiftly to the cottage of his fair friend.

"Addie," he cried, as she opened the door to his signal, "Wild Bill and a crowd of full fifty men are coming here to rob you, and burn your house. They are mad with drink, and even if the stranger up stairs will fight, we three can hardly hold them at bay, no matter how well we are armed."

"We will not try it!" said Addie, calmly. "I had about made up my mind to go with Persimmon Bill. He loves me so well that I ought to be able and willing to bear hardship for his sake. I care little for the house and furniture, though they are mine, and cost me a large sum. I have money and jewelry that we can carry off. I will rouse my two servants while you call your friend, and we will all be out of the house before they come. No one but you knows where your horses are kept. Let that be the place of rendezvous, and before daylight we will be safe with my lover."

"No; I do not want to be with him yet, Addie. I will take this newly found friend and see you safely in reach of Bill, but we will make camp elsewhere till Bill's party starts. Then we'll be on his trail, and you on ours, as it was agreed upon."

"As you like, Jack. But we must hurry."

"All right—as soon as I bring my friend down, do you go with him and your servants to the stable, carrying off what you can. Leave me here, for I want to give Wild Bill one more good scare."

"As you please, but be careful he don't kill you while you scare him. Ah! I hear their yells. We must be quick."

Willie Pond had a white, scared face when he came from his chamber, for while the Texan told him of the danger, the yells and shouts of the drunken ruffians who were approaching could be plainly heard. It seemed as if a gang of demons from the lower regions had been let loose on earth.

"Come with me," cried Addie Neidie, as Mr. Pond came down with his valise in hand. "Be quick, or there will be murder under this roof."

Pond, seemingly dazed and bewildered, obeyed, and out by a rear door hastened the fair owner of the doomed house, with her maid, or man-servant, and Willie Pond, while the Texan, telling them he soon would follow, remained.

Plainly now the shouts and vile threats of the drunken marauders came to the ears of the single listener.

"I wish I had a barrel or two of gunpowder here," he muttered. "I'd make them sing another tune."

Nearer and nearer they came, and now the Texan extinguished every light but one, which he shaded with his hat. Then he looked to the front door and windows, and saw that they were all barred, except a single shutter which he left so he could open it.

A minute later, and the tramp of a hundred hurrying feet came loudly on his ear. Then shouts:

"Clean her out. Kill her and burn her crib!"

In a minute the crowd brought up before the closed doors.

"Open your doors, woman, or we'll shatter them!" cried Wild Bill.

"Open, or down goes everything!" shouted the crowd.

"Here, Bill; here is a shutter loose!" cried one.

Wild Bill sprang toward it, and as he did so the shutter flew open; he saw a white face surrounded by auburn hair; he heard one gasping cry—"sister"—and he fell back in terror, crying out:

"The ghost! the ghost!"

But some one fired a shot, the light went out, and all was dark where the light had been.

Bill recovered from his shock almost as soon as he felt it, and joined with the shout:

"Down with the doors! Down with the doors."

The crash that followed, told that the frail obstacles had given way, and Bill cried out:

"In and clean the crib out. Ghost or no ghost, give us light, and clean the crib out!"

Cheer after cheer told that the house was entered, and a minute later, torches made from splintered doors and shutters, blazed in a dozen hands as the ruffians ran to and fro in search of plunder.

"The ghost. Find the ghost, or the woman!" yelled Bill.

CHAPTER X.

A MYSTERY.

The excited and ruffianly crowd dashed to and fro, overturning the furniture, tearing aside curtains, and looking for plunder, but unable to find anything of value, beyond the furniture, or to see a single living person under the roof. Not a dollar in money, not a piece of plate rewarded their search.

"Fire the crib! fire the crib!" came from fifty throats, and almost as soon as spoken, the act was consummated.

Wild Bill, angered to find no one on whom to vent his wrath, or slake his thirst for revenge, looked on the blaze as it rose with gloomy satisfaction, muttering that he only wished the witch of a woman was burning in it.

The crowd increased as the flames rose higher and higher, but no one tried to check them, and soon it was but a smoldering mass of ruins where the pretty cottage had stood.

But the late occupant, unharmed, was a mile away, and having just paid off and discharged her faithful servants, was on the point of mounting to ride off with the Texan and Mr. Pond, when the last shout of the dispersing crowd reached her ears.

She smiled when she heard it, and said:

"I can afford all the harm they have done. I led but a lonesome life there. I feel that the change I am about to make will be for the better."

The three, with two loaded horses besides those they rode, now moved quietly but swiftly out of the suburbs of the town, where the horses had been stabled, and with the Texan leading the way, steered to the westward, having no compass but the stars.

For an hour the three rode on, and then, pointing to some timber ahead, the Texan said:

"Addie, there is where you will find him whom you seek. Tell him I have not altered any of my plans, and that I shall lay in camp to-morrow at Lone-trees Spring, an hour's gallop south of the Twenty-mile Creek. The next morning I will follow the trail we spoke of. And now, Addie, good-by, and don't forget me."

"You know I will not. I hope yet to see you happy, and to be happier than I am now. We shall meet again, perhaps, Mr. Pond, but good-night for now."

And while the Texan and Mr. Pond remained still on their horses, she rode on, leading one pack-horse, toward a growth of trees seen dimly ahead.

The Texan remained where he was until he heard her give the signal and receive an answer, and then turning to Pond, he said:

"She is safe; we may as well move on. We have a long ride to where I intend to camp."

"All right," said the other. "This night's work seems almost like a dream. I can hardly realize that Wild Bill would lead such a disgraceful crowd of ruffians, and do such a dastardly act as to burn a woman out of house and home."

"Rum takes all the man out of those who use it," said the Texan. "I use it myself sometimes, I know, but it is when I feel as if I was all giving out, and couldn't go through what was before me. And I feel abashed when I think I need such a stimulant to fire up my flagging nature."

Pond made no reply, but rode on thoughtfully at the rapid pace which the other led, the pack animal keeping close in the rear. At last he asked:

"Who did Miss Neidie expect to meet where we left her?"

"A brave man who loves her dearly, but who has been driven in his desperation by cruel injustices to do some work which keeps him outside of towns and settlements for the present. His love is returned by her, and henceforth she will share his dangers and his hardships."

"None can tell but those who test it, how deeply, how entirely, and how lasting a true woman loves," said Pond, with a sigh.

"And none but a woman wronged can tell how bitterly she can hate!" said the other, as he dashed his spurs into his horse and galloped on.

Miles were swiftly passed over, and the gray of dawn was just beginning to soften night's darkness in the east, when the Texan exclaimed:

"Here we are; now for a rest of one day, at least."

And as he spoke he drew up his horse by the side of a small pool of water, which trickled out from under the roots of a single large tree. For an acre or so around it there were bushes growing as high as the horse, but when light came, no other growth but that of abort buffalo grass and prickly cactus could be seen.

The Texan unsaddled his horse, and unloaded the pack animal before Pond could get his saddle ungirthed. Then the Texan sprang to his assistance, finished stripping the horse, and with a long lariat picketed it out in the best grass. His own horses he turned loose, saying they never would stray from camp.

Then, taking his rifle, he stepped out from camp, saying he was going after meat.

In fifteen or twenty minutes, Pond heard the crack of his rifle, and in less than half an hour the young man was back, with the fat saddle of a young antelope on his shoulder.

"Here is meat enough for to-day and to-morrow," he said. "Next day we will be on buffalo ground, and we'll have some hump ribs to roast."

Gathering a few dry, light sticks, he soon had a hot and almost smokeless fire ablaze. On the coals of this he set his coffee-pot, broiled some meat, and while Mr. Pond looked on in surprise, he quickly had a nice breakfast of antelope steak, coffee, and a few hard biscuits which were in the pack.

While Pond took hold and ate heartily, praising the food by his actions as much as his words, the Texan ate lightly, yet all that he wanted—not touching the bread, but using meat entirely.

"There'll be the more left for you," said he, when Pond noticed that he ate no bread. "I never care for anything but meat on the plains. It gives bone and muscle, and that is what we need here. The more simple the food, the better the health. We use ourselves to salt, but we would be just as well off without it. Eat hearty, and take a good nap. We have nothing to do to-day. The party whose trail will be our guide to the 'Hills' will not start till late. We shall not move until to-morrow morning, and then I'll show you the coals of the camp-fire which they'll light to-night. There will be no need for any shelter but this tree overhead. Everything looks clean and dry skyward—there's no better camping ground than this for a couple on the plains. The water is good, feed plenty, and we don't require much fire this time of year."

Pond, tired and sleepy, was only too glad to take the Texan's advice, so he spread his blanket, lay down, and soon was in the land of dreams.

Meantime the Texan, with a small field-glass in his hand, mounted the tree, and, from a perch on its uppermost limbs, scanned the prairie in all directions, but most often in the direction from which they had come.

Nothing was in sight but wild game, scattered here and there, and he soon came down and prepared to take a rest on his own account.

"They'll not pass till afternoon," he muttered, "and I may as well rest a few hours while I can in peace and safety."

He took a long and curious look at the form of his sleeping traveling companion, and a strange smile flitted over his face, as he muttered:

"A mystery, but I can solve it."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE WILDS.

If ever a man was astonished, when he responded to that after-midnight signal at the mouth of Dead Man's Hollow, it was the outlaw, Persimmon Bill. He came from his place of concealment expecting to meet the Texan with news, and found instead Addie Neidic, and with her, on a pack horse, all the wealth and apparel she had in the world.

"Addie, love, what does this mean?" he cried, as she sprang from the horse and threw herself into his arms.

"It means this, Bill. I have come to stay with you, go where you go, live as you live, and die where you die!"

"Addie, dearest, did I not tell you to wait till I could give you a home in peace and quietness?"

"Yes, Bill, but there were those that would not let me wait. To-night, had it not been for my Texan friend, most likely I would have been murdered by a mob of drunken ruffians led on by Wild Bill. Warned in time, I escaped with all that I had worth saving, except my horse and furniture. Those they burned; I saw the blaze from my stable, where I went to get my horses to come to you."

"By all that's fiendish, this is more than I can bear! I'll ride in with my Sioux and burn the cursed town!"

"No, Bill; for my sake keep cool and hear me. I am glad it is done. I was wretched and lonely there—how lonely no words

may tell. I was in constant anxiety on your account. I trembled daily, hourly, lest I should hear of your death or capture. Now I shall be with you, know of your safety, or if you are in peril, share the danger with you."

"But, Addie, you can never endure the privations and the fatigue of such a life as I must lead at present. Soon I must be on a bloody war-path. We will have regular troops to meet, great battles to fight."

"And it will be my glory and pride to be with you in all your perils—to show your red allies what a pale-faced woman dares and can do for him whom she loves."

"Dearest, I see not how it can be helped. But I grieve to see you suffer."

"Do not grieve, my love, while my face is bright with smiles. Do not let your heart be heavy while mine is full of joy. Think but this—I am thine until death. We will never part while life thrills our veins. Your triumphs shall be mine; I will glory in your courage, and in your enterprise. I have arms and well know their use. No warrior in all your following can ride better than I. That I am fearless I really believe, for twice inside of ten hours have I defied Wild Bill in his anger, and laughed when his hand was on his pistol. But take me to your camp. I am tired, and the night air is chilly; and take care of the pack horse. My silver and over one hundred thousand dollars in money is on his back, and what clothing I shall need for a time."

"You bring a rich dowry, Addie, but your love is worth more than all the treasures the world could show. Come, darling, I will take you as the most precious gift a wild, bad man ever received."

"You are not bad, Bill. You are my hero and my love!"

Bill could only press his answer on her lips, and then with the bridle of her horse in his hand, and her arm linked in his, he walked back up the winding bed of the ravine for near a quarter of a mile.

Then he emerged into an open space where there were full a hundred Indian ponies staked out, with their owners lying in groups about near small smoldering camp-fires. A few only were on guard, and these on seeing their white chief appear paid no apparent attention to the companion, though they doubtless saw her. It is the Indian's nature to be stoical, and never to manifest surprise, no matter what occurs.

Inside the line where the ponies were staked was a small brush house, and in front of this Bill halted with his led horses, with his own hands unsaddled one and unpacked the other, leaving packs and saddles in front of the house.

Well he knew they were as safe there as they would have been behind bolts and bars in the settlements—even more safe.

"Come in, my love," he said. "The Sioux will care for the horses. Come in and receive the best a fond heart can give in the way of shelter and comfort."

"It is all I ask," she murmured, as with him she entered the "Outlaw's Home."

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRAIL.

It was high noon when the young Texan woke up, and when he rose Pond still lay sleeping. The former laughed lightly, as he rose and bathed his face in the limpid water, for the beard of the sleeper had got all awry, showing that it was false.

"No need for a disguise here," said the Texan. "But let him keep it up. When the time comes I'll read him a lesson."

Cutting some antelope steaks, the Texan built up a smokeless fire, and had them nicely broiled when Willie Pond woke up.

"Mercy! how I have slept!" he said, as he looked at the sun, already fast declining toward the west.

"You are not used to passing sleepless nights," said the Texan. "When we are fairly launched into the Indian country you may not sleep so sound. Take hold and eat. A hearty eater on the plains generally stands travel best. To-morrow, it is likely, we'll have a fifty-mile ride or more, if those Black Hillers get sobered down to their work. They'll do well if they make their twenty to-day."

Pond went and bathed his face and hands in the limpid water before eating, and as he expressed it, "rubbed the sleep" out of his eyes; then he went at the toothsome steak with appetite not at all impaired by the pure open air he was breathing.

The meal, taken with comfort and deliberation, occupied a half hour or more, and as there were no dishes to wash, "clearing up things" only consisting in tossing the bones out of the way, wiping their knives on a bunch of grass, scouring them with a plunge or two in the dry sand, they were all ready for next meal-time.

"Your horse hears something, so does mine," said the Texan,

pointing to the animals, which suddenly stopped feeding, and with their ears pricked forward, looked off to the east-ward.

"I can see nothing. What can alarm them?" said Pond.

"They hear the tramp of the Black Hills party, I think. Horses have far better hearing than we have, and will feel a jar of the ground that would not attract our attention. I want no better sentinel than my mustang, and your Black Hawk seems to take to the watch by instinct. I will go up on my look-out post and see if anything is in sight."

Slung the strap of his field-glass over his shoulder, the Texan hurriedly climbed up the tree. Seated among the top-most limbs, he adjusted his glass and looked away to the north-east.

"There they are!" he cried.

"Who? What?" exclaimed Pond, rather nervously.

"The Black Hillers, straggling along mighty careless. Their route covers half a mile in length; when in good marching order it should not cover a hundred yards, with scouts in the rear, front, and on both flanks, at twice the distance. That is the way we travel in Texas."

"Wild Bill has been a scout so long I should think he would know all about it," said Pond.

"A heap them scouts know who travel with Uncle Sam's troop's!" said the Texan, in a tone of contempt. "Let them ride with a gang of Texan Raogers a few months and they'd learn something. Your troops can't move, or stop to water, without sounding their bugles to tell the Indians where they are. In the morning, all day, and at night, it is toot, toot with their infernal horns, and the reds know just where to find 'em. One of our Texan Ranger bands will travel a hundred miles and you'll not hear noise enough to wake a coyote from them all. These Black Hillers travel slow to-day. They're sore-headed from their spree, I reckon."

"They deserve to be. Drunkenness always punishes the drunkard. I have no pity for them."

"Can you see any sign of them from where you stand?" asked the Texan.

Pond looked carefully off in the direction the other pointed, and replied:

"No. They do not even raise dust."

"Then we are safe here from observation. They go too slow to make dust, and they're moving over grass any way. It will be dark before they reach their camping-ground. But to make the next, which is full fifty miles away, they'll have to start earlier. Ah! what does that mean?"

"What startles you?"

"Nothing *startles* me, but a couple of men from that party have dashed out from the line at a gallop, and they ride this way."

"Heaven! I hope Bill—Wild Bill—is not one of them!" cried Pond, greatly excited. "Are you sure they are coming here?"

"Riding *this way* does not assume that they're coming *here!*" said the Texan, coolly. "They may have flanked off to look for some fresh meat. Yes, that is it," he added. "They bear up to the north now; they want to go ahead of the party so as to kill something fresh for supper. Captain Jack kept sober when all the rest were drinking last night, and I'll wager he is one of the hunters, and most likely Sam Chichester is the other. We're safe from observation, Mr. Pond, so don't get nervous. We'll not see Wild Bill to-day."

Pond smiled, but there was a tremor about him that showed he was easy to take alarm and hard to get over it.

The Texan came down from the tree and busied himself in gathering some dry fuel—small sticks which would make a quick hot blaze and little or no smoke. Then he cut off some long thin flakes of antelope flesh from the saddle hanging on the tree, and half cooked, half dried it.

"Meat may be a little unhandy to get in the rear of that straggling band," he said. "If we have a little on hand, it will do no hurt."

"You are thoughtful," said Pond. "I would make a poor manager, I fear, on the plains. I should forget everything until it was needed."

"You are not too old to learn," said the Texan, laughing.

"Excuse my asking the question, but have you long been acquainted with that strange and beautiful woman, Addie Neidic?"

"Not very long, myself. But I had a brother who knew her very well, and loved her almost to madness. She was his true friend, but she did not love him."

"Is he living now?"

"Living? *No!* If ever you meet Wild Bill—but no, it is *my* secret. Ask me no more about him."

Every word just spoken flew from the Texan's lips like sheets

of fire; his eyes flashed and his face flushed, while his form trembled from head to foot.

"Forgive me! I did not mean to wound your feelings!" said Pond, moved by the excitement of the other.

"No matter; I know you didn't. No matter. It will all come right one of these days. I wish my heart was stone!"

Pond was silent, for he saw the Texan's eyes fill with tears, and he seemed to know that nothing which he could say could soften a grief so deeply felt.

The Texan was the first to speak.

"Addie Neidic is a strange, but a noble girl," he said. "Her father was a rough sporting man, but her mother was a lady born and bred. The mother lived long enough to educate Addie in her own ways, but she died just as Addie was budding into beauty. Addie met her lover when he was a soldier at Fort Russell, near Cheyenne. After he was driven to desertion by cruelty and injustice, she met him from time to time, and when her father died, leaving her all his fortune, she moved up to Laramie. I think I know now the reason why—she could meet him more often."

"You said that he was an outlaw."

"Yes; when he deserted he killed the two sentinels who were on guard over him, then killed a mounted officer and rode away on his horse. He was hunted for by whole companies as fast as they could be mounted, but he could not be taken. But after that, if a soldier or an officer rode alone a mile or more from the post, he seldom returned, but his body told that Persimmon Bill, the 'Soldier Killer,' as he was called, still lived around. Wild Bill has done bloody work—cruel work in his time, but Persimmon Bill has killed ten men to his one."

"It is strange that an intelligent woman like Addie Neidic should love such a man."

"No—he is both a martyr and a hero in her eyes. A more stately form, a nobler face, never met favor in the eyes of woman. To his foes fierce and relentless, to her he is gentle and kind. She will never meet aught but tenderness at his hands."

"I wish I could have seen him."

"You may yet see him, Mr. Pond. He travels the plains as free as the antelopes which bound from ridge to ridge. Adopted by the Sioux nation, known to them as the 'White Elk,' he has become a great chief, and their young braves follow in his lead with a confidence which makes them better than the soldiers sent to subdue them."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACK HILLERS EN ROUTE.

The young Texan had judged rightly when he conjectured that it was Sam Chichester and Captain Jack that had ridden out from the straggling column of the Black Hillers, as he saw from his eyrie in the tree.

They had two objects in doing so. The ostensible object was to reach the camping-ground first with some game for supper, but another was to converse, unheard by the others, on the probable dangers of the trip, and means to meet and overcome such dangers.

"There is no doubt the Sioux are on the war-path," said Chichester to Captain Jack, as they rode on side by side.

"None in the world. They've taken a hundred scalps or more already on the Black Hills route. The troops have been ordered to move up the Missouri and Yellowstone, and that will make them worse than ever. We'll be lucky if we get through without a brush. That was a mean thing, the burning out of that Neidic girl last night, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Crawford, and if Persimmon Bill ever comes across Wild Bill, *his goose is cooked!* Mark that. There is not a surer shot, or a deadlier foe on earth than Persimmon Bill. He has defied the whole border for the past three years—ridden right into a military post and shot men down, and got away without a scratch. They say he has been adopted by the Sioux, and if he has, with such backing, he'll do more mischief than ever."

"I don't believe Bill would have injured the woman had he been sober. It was a mean thing to do any way, and I'm sorry any of our party had a hand in it."

"So am I. But look, Jack, you can see tree-tops ahead. That is the timber on Twenty-mile Creek. There we camp. We'll spread a little here, and the one who sees a fat elk first will drop him. We'll keep within sight and hearing of each other, and if one fires the other will close on him."

"All right, Sam."

And the brave young scout, all the better for being ever temperate and steady, gently diverged to the right, while Chichester bore off to the left.

Game in the shape of prairie hens rose right and left as they

rode on, and every little while a band of antelopes, taking the alarm, would be seen bounding over the sandy ridges, while an elk farther off, startled by the antelope, would take fright and trot off in style.

The two hunters were now nearing the timber, and they rode more slowly and with greater caution.

Suddenly, as Chichester rose over a small ridge, he came upon a band of a dozen or more noble elk, which trotted swiftly off to the right, where Captain Jack, seeing them coming, had sprung from his horse and crouched low on the ridge.

Chichester saw his movement, and lowered the rifle which he had raised for a flying shot, for he knew by their course the elk would go so close to Crawford that he could take his pick among them and make a sure shot.

The result justified his movement, for the noble animals, seeing only a riderless horse, scented no danger, and kept on until they were within easy pistol-shot of the experienced hunter.

Crack went his rifle, and the largest, fattest elk of the band gave one mighty bound and fell, while the rest bounded away in another course, fully alarmed at the report of a gun so close and its effects so deadly to the leader of the band.

"You've got as nice a bit of mest here as ever was cut up," cried Chichester to Captain Jack, as he came in at a gallop, while Crawford was cutting the throat of the huge elk. "The boys will have enough to choke on when we get to camp."

"I reckon they'll not growl over this," said Jack, laughing. "I never had an easier shot. They came down from your wind, and never saw me till I raised with a bead on this one's heart."

The two hunters had their meat all cut up and in condition for packing to camp when the column came up.

One hour later, just as the sun began to dip beyond the trees on the creek side, the party went into camp, and soon, over huge and carelessly built camp-fires, slices of elk steak and elk ribs were roasting and steaming in a most appetizing way.

The party were hungry, and the hungriest among them were those who had drunk the hardest the night before, for till now they had not been able to eat. But the day's travel had worked some of the poison run out of them, and their empty stomachs craved something good and substantial, and they had it in the fresh, juicy elk meat.

It was a hard and unruly crowd to manage on the start. Chichester found it difficult to get men to act as sentinels, for they mostly declared that there was no danger of Indians and no need to set guards.

Little did they dream that even then, within three hours' ride, or even less, there were enough blood-thirsty Sioux to meet them in fair fight, and defeat them, too.

Only by standing a watch himself and putting Crawford on for the most dangerous hour, that of approaching dawn, did Captain Chichester manage to have his first night's camp properly guarded.

Wild Bill, gloomy and morose, said he didn't "care a cuss" if all the Indians of the Sioux nation pitched upon them. He knew his time was close at hand, and what did it matter to him whether a red wore his scalp at his belt or some white man gloried in having wiped him out.

But the night passed without disturbance, and a very early start was made next morning.

Chichester made the men all fill their canteens with water, and the animals were all led into the stream to drink their fill, for there was a long, dry march to the next camping-ground.

Chichester and Captain Jack both knew the route well, for they had both been over it in one of the first prospecting parties to the "Hills."

CHAPTER XIV.

POND SEIZED WITH TERROR.

Nothing of note occurred in the little camp at the Lone-tree Spring that first night. Just before sunset the young Texan and Willie Pond took a gallop of four or five miles to exercise their horses and use themselves to the saddle, and when they came back with freshened appetites, ate heartily, and afterward slept soundly.

The next morning both woke with the sun, and after a hearty meal the pack-horse was loaded, the other animals saddled, and the route taken for the Hills.

A ride of six or seven miles brought them into the trail of the larger party, and at noon, or a little before, the Texans halted on the camping ground occupied by that party the night before.

The embers of their fires were yet alive, and over them the Texan cooked dinner for himself and companion.

Pointing to the bones and scraps of meat thrown around, the Texan laughed, and said:

"They've plenty now, but before they get through they'll be more careful, for if the Indians are thick, game will be hard to get; and I'm thinking they'll find Indians before they're three days out."

"You said the Sioux would be friendly to you?"

"Yes; I have a talisman. Did you not see me put this eagle feather, tipped with crimson, in my hat last night before I rode out?"

"Yes. Is that your talisman?"

"It is. It is from the coronet of a Sioux chief, and was given to me as a safeguard."

"I wish I had one."

"Keep with me and you will not need it."

"Do not fear that I will go far from you. Alone, I should feel utterly lost on these prairies. Where will we camp to-night?"

"Very close to the party that is ahead of us. They will go to a creek and a piece of timber that is fully fifty miles from here. About a mile from where I think they will camp there is a small ravine, in which we will find what grass and water we need. It will be near nightfall when we get there, if we do our best in travel. But if we ride hard, we'll take the longer rest. I do not care to keep too close to them as a general thing, but to-night we can't help it."

Their nooning was short, and taking the precaution to water their horses well, and fill their canteens, they rode forward over the well-defined trail quite swiftly.

Toward night they could see the trail freshened, but nothing was in sight except a distant mark when night fell, which two Texans said was the timber where the party ahead would camp. Just as the sun was setting smoke was seen to rise in that direction, and the Texan spoke contemptuously of the carelessness which would thus expose a camping-place to those who were yet miles distant.

"If a captain of a ranger band would do such a thing in Texas," he said, "his men would reduce him to the ranks and put one in his place who knew how to be cautious."

"It surely is imprudent. But they are a large party to cook for, and must have large fires," said Pond.

The young Texan laughed scornfully.

"Let every man make his own fire, make such fires as you have seen me make, and the smoke could not be seen a rifle-shot away," was the answer. "That party will never reach the Hills. Mark that! If Indians are within twenty miles they'll see a smoke like that. But what is it to us? We're safe."

"I am not so selfish as to wish harm to reach them, even if we are safe!" said Pond, testily.

"That is as much as to say that I am selfish. Well, I acknowledge it. I go in for number one. If they can't take ordinary care of themselves, let them suffer."

Willie Pond made no answer, but rode on in silence. Night was now upon them, and all was still except the thud of the galloping hoofs upon the plain.

Suddenly a gleam of fire was seen far ahead. The Texan noted it, and swerved off to the left.

"There is the camp," he said. "I can easily find our resting-place now. I was afraid we would not see their fires until we were right up to the timber. But they are careless with their fire as they are with their smoke. We shall have moonlight in an hour, and in less time we'll be in camp."

He rode on now, more slowly, for the horses were tired, and he seemed to know so well where to go that there was no haste.

The moon was just above the trees when the Texan led the way into a narrow ravine, with heavy timber on either side. Up this, full ten minutes they rode, and then an exclamation of pleased wonder broke from the lips of Willie Pond. For they came out into an open circular plain or area of several acres in extent, covered with rich grass and centered by a bright, mirror-like lake.

"What a lovely spot!" cried Pond. "Who on earth would dream of finding such a paradise inside of gates so dark and rude."

"Ooe who had been here before," said the Texan. "But speak low, for careless as they may be over there in camp, some one might be outside listening."

"Why, it is over a mile away, is it not?"

"Yes, along the line of the wood. But over this cliff, were it crossed, it is not a quarter of that distance."

And the Texan pointed to a rugged tree-crowned cliff on their right.

"I will be careful," said Pond. "My enthusiasm breaks out when I see beautiful things. I can hardly restrain myself."

"We will unsaddle and camp. Our horses are tired, and need food and drink," was all that the Texan said.

And he at once unloaded the pack-horse, and unsaddled his mustang.

Pond, becoming more handy, now did the same for Black Hawk, who seemed to take quite a fancy to his new master, curving his back proudly under his caressing touch.

"Shall I picket him, as we did at the last camp?" asked Pond, when he had unsaddled his horse.

"No, let him go with mine. They have been together long enough to mate, and they'll feed peaceably in company. Mine will never stray or stampede, and the other will not go off alone."

The simple camp was soon fixed; and as they had cooked meat left, and biscuit, with plenty of water to drink, both agreed that there was no necessity to build any fire.

"The smell of smoke might reach some sharp-nosed scout over there," said the Texan, "for the wind blows that way. We'll eat, and then turn in, for rest will come good to both of us."

The horses plunged off to the water and drank, and then went to cropping the luxuriant grass, while their masters ate their suppers with appetites strengthened by their long and wearying ride.

After they had supped, Willie Pond would, as usual, have enjoyed his dainty cigarette, had not the Texan warned him that tobacco smoke would scent farther than any other, and might be more dangerous, in betraying their presence, than anything else.

So Mr. Pond had to forego his smoke. He took a blanket, and moving up to a little mossy knoll just under the edge of the cliff, threw himself down to sleep.

The Texan also took his blanket, but he lay down near the saddles and packs.

Pond was so very weary that he soon fell asleep. How long he slept he did not know, but a strange, oppressive dream woke him, and with the moonlight shining full in the valley, while he lay shaded beneath a tree and the overhanging cliff, he saw a sight which froze his very heart with a mortal terror.

The ravine by which he and his companion had entered was filled with mounted Indians, who were riding silently into the little valley.

CHAPTER XV.

CHEATED OF THEIR PREY.

Literally dumb with terror, so weak that he could not rise, Pond saw this strange cavalcade moving up toward the little lake, and looked to the spot where the Texan had lain down to see if he had yet taken the alarm.

To his wonder and redoubled alarm, he saw the Texan not alone, but with a white man, dressed in buckskin, by his side, and a woman also, apparently in friendly converse, calmly waiting the Indian advance.

Recognizing at a glance the woman as Addie Neidic, Pond realized that the man must be no other than Persimmon Bill, and that his followers were the blood-thirsty Sioux; whom he headed.

"Heaven help me! There is some fearful treachery here. Wild Bill and his companions are lost if they are not warned in time. How can it be done?"

How strangely, as if by intuition, strategy, and cunning thought come to some when environed by unlooked-for danger.

Without a moment's hesitation, Pond so arranged his blanket that if glanced at it would appear he was yet sleeping under it, for he left his hat on the stone where his head had been, and his rifle leaning against the tree right over it.

Then, bare-headed, with no weapons but his pistols and knife in his belt, he crept off up the hill-side with the silence and stealth of a scout who had been a life-time in the business. He wondered at himself as he began to scale the mountain-side, not daring to look back, how he could creep up amid those fearful crags so noiselessly, and how he could have got away unseen, when the Texan and those who were with him were not a pistol shot away.

On, on he kept, ever seeking the shadowed spots, where no moonlight could reveal his form, until at last he was on the very crest of the hill. Looking down he plainly saw the camp-fires of the Black Hillers below. They were most likely buried in slumber, and, if they had sentinels out, his life would be endangered by a rapid approach. But of this he seemed not to think as he hurried almost recklessly down through thickets, over crags, and along rugged gulches.

How he got down he hardly knew, but he was down, and rushing toward the nearest fire, when he heard a stern, short summons close in his front:

"Halt! Who comes there?"

A man, armed with rifle and pistols, stepped from the shadow of a tree, and Pond gasped out:

"A friend. A friend come to save all your lives. There are a

hundred Indians within a mile of you, led by the desperado, Persimmon Bill."

"Who are you?" was the stern inquiry.

"Wild Bill will know me. Take me to him, quick!" was the response.

"To our captain first. Come along!" said the sentinel.

The next moment Willie Pond was in the presence of Sam Chichester and Captain Jack, telling his story.

"It looks like truth, and if it is, the quicker we get out of here the better. If we can get fifteen or twenty miles the start we may keep it," said Chichester.

"He says Wild Bill knows him. Where is Bill?" cried Jack. "Ah, there he comes."

Bill, awakened by hearing his name called, was rising, and now approached the party.

Pond sprang forward, and addressed him hurriedly in whispered tones.

Wild Bill for an instant seemed lost in astonishment, his first exclamation being, "Great Heaven! you here?"

But after he heard the whispered words be only added, addressing Chichester:

"Captain, this friend of mine will not lie. We are in danger, and he has risked his life to save us. I want a spare horse for him, and the sooner we get from here, the better for our hair."

With as little noise as possible, the whole party were aroused, and the danger explained. Quickly the animals were saddled, and in less than twenty minutes the camp-ground was all deserted, though more fuel had been purposely heaped on the fires to keep up the appearance of occupation, if scouts should be sent to examine the camp.

"It lacks four hours yet to daylight!" said Chichester to Captain Jack. "We'll get just that much start, for they'll make no attack until just as day begins to break. I know the ways of them red cusses only too well."

"You haven't much the advantage of me in that kind of knowledge, Sam. But if that fellow was anywhere right as to their numbers, and the Sioux are well mounted, they'll bother us yet before we get to the hills, no matter if we do get eighteen or twenty miles the start!"

"We'll give 'em a long race and a tough tussle before they get our hair any way!" said Chichester. "I wonder who that fellow is? Bill seems to like him right well, for they ride as close as their horses can move together. Bill has supplied him with a hat—he came in bare-headed, you know."

"Yes; he must have had a terrible climb to get over to us. The only wonder is he got away undiscovered."

"He said he left his blanket in a shape to make them think he was sleeping under it."

"He must be an old hand to fool them so nicely."

"He doesn't look like it. He doesn't ride like a scout or a plainsman—he sits his horse too gracefully."

"No matter; one thing is certain. Wild Bill knows him well, trusts him, and they stick as close together as twins."

"Yes, Captain Jack, I wish you'd take the rear and make those packers keep up. There must be no lagging. If a horse or mule fails they must be left. I'll keep the advance going."

Thus the Black Hillers swept on at a gallop, knowing that a merciless fate was theirs if overtaken by the Sioux.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PURSUIT.

The young Texan had not dreamed of being followed so soon by Persimmon Bill and his Indians, and he had lain down to sleep as honestly and confidently as Willie Pond, when he dropped down by the saddles and pack.

He was aroused by a touch on his shoulder, when he awoke and was surprised to find Bill and Addie Neidic standing by his side.

"Where are your Indians?" was the first question the Texan asked, as Bill whispered, in a low tone:

"I am here. I have followed the trail a little sooner than I thought I would. The Indians are in the ravine waiting for my signal to come in and let their horses feed and rest before we attack. Where is your friend?" continued Bill.

"Sound asleep under that tree up there. He sleeps like a log, and will not wake till I shake him up. I never saw such a sleeper. Yesterday he spent most of the day snoring."

"It is well. There is no use of alarming him before we are ready for work. I will give the signal, and let my warriors file in."

The outlaw waved a blanket in the air, and the Indians silently filed into the valley. At another signal they turned their horses loose to graze, and then gathered in groups out on the plain to take food and rest themselves while their leader conversed with the Texan, whom having seen before, they knew as his friend.

Meantime, the Texan motioning Addie Neidic and her lover to take seats on his blanket, conversed with the latter in a low tone on the plan of attack.

"I shall not make it until just as day dawns—for two reasons," said the outlaw. "First, then they will keep the most careless guard; second, when light is coming, we can see how to kill, and how to save the two whose lives are to be spared. We will do the work in a hurry when it is done. I have given my warriors their orders; most of them know Wild Bill and Captain Jack, for both have been on the reservations often when they have been in. For these reds can go where I cannot, and get arms and ammunition where I would not dare apply for them."

"Shall I not make you and Addie some coffee?" asked the Texan. "I can do it without danger, for I have a small alcohol lamp in my pack, which I had to keep for use when I could not get fuel."

"It will be refreshing, indeed, if there is no risk in making it," said Addie Neidic.

"There is none, and I will soon have it made," was the reply.

Shaded from even Indian observation by the blanket he raised on some bushes, the young Texan speedily made a quart cupful of strong coffee, and shared it between the lady and her outlaw lover. It and some cooked meat he had given them strength, and then all three lay down like the others to rest for an hour or two, the outlaw bidding one of his warriors keep watch, and to wake him when the morning star was seen over the trees in the east.

And little dreaming that their intended victims were far away from their camp, the Indians and their leader took rest preparatory to their deadly work.

When his warrior sentinel awoke him, Persimmon Bill found that the morning star was well up, and it was full time to be moving toward the scene of action.

"You will stay here in the valley, dear Addie, till we come back," he said. "We will steal away quietly, and not wake that sleeping stranger if it can be helped, for he might, in his terror, fire his gun, or in some way give an alarm. Should he wake, hearing firing over there, keep him quiet with persuasion or your revolver until we return, and then—if he is obstreperous, I will quiet him."

"Let me go with you, Bill, she said. "I am not afraid."

"It must not be, dear Addie. There is no need of your being exposed *there*, and it is well to have *him* watched *here*. Our main certainty of complete success is in a surprise. The least alarm may prevent it."

"I will remain then," she said. "And you need not fear for any alarm from him—for I know I can keep him quiet should he wake. I have a keen persuader here, if I have to use it."

And she touched a poniard in her belt, which also contained two good revolvers.

"An outlaw's bride," she added, smiling, "must be prepared to take care of herself."

The Indians now began silently to form their march, as they saw their white leader mount, and the young Texan also get his horse. The Black Hawk seemed uneasy that his master was not at hand, and the Texan was obliged to tie him by the side of the horse ridden by Addie Neidic before he would be quiet.

"It is strange that Mr. Pond does not wake with all this noise," said the Texan, as he rode off with Persimmon Bill. "But as I told you, he is the soundest sleeper I ever traveled with."

The Indians now filed away out of the valley as silently as they entered it, for, knowing the close vicinity of the other camp, they were aware how necessary it was to be cautious.

And now Addie Neidic stood alone, while the morning star rose higher and higher, gazing at what she supposed was the sleeping man on the knoll.

The moon had got so far around that she could see his hat, the rifle against the tree, and the outlines of his form, as she believed.

"I will move up and secure his rifle," she thought, after the hand had been gone some time. "He might wake, and in his first alarm use it foolishly."

So she moved with a noiseless step within reach of the gun, and the next moment it was in her possession. Then she looked down, to see if he showed signs of waking. To her surprise, she saw no motion as of a breathing form under the blanket. A closer look told her that if a form had been beneath the blanket, or a head under that hat, it was gone. And, feeling with her hand under the blanket, she found it cold; no warm living form had been there for hours.

"He has been alarmed, seen us, and crept away—perhaps is hiding in terror in the brush," she muttered.

She did not even then realize that he might have fled away to alarm the other camp. She did not even understand several shrill yells, which reached her ear from over the hill. She had not been with the Sioux long enough to know their cries. These

yells were the signal cries of scouts sent in, who had found a deserted camp. She only wondered, after hearing the yells, that she did not hear firing—the sounds of battle raging.

While she yet wondered, day dawned, finding her standing there by the empty blanket of Willie Pond, holding his rifle, and looking up the hill to see if he would not creep out, now that light had come and the Indians had gone.

A shrill neigh from the black horse called her attention toward the animal, and she saw the Texan riding into the valley on a keen roo.

"Where is Bill?" she asked, as she ran to meet the rider, with Pond's blanket, hat, and rifle in her hand.

"Gone at full speed with his warriors on the trail of the Black Hillers, who have been alarmed in some way, and have got at least two hours' start. He sent me back to bring you and Pond along."

"Here is all of Mr. Pond that can be found," said Addie, holding up what she had found. "I went to the nest, the bird had flown, and the nest was cold."

The Texan rode quickly to the spot, and in a moment saw the trail over the ridge made by Pond when he had escaped.

"It was he who gave the alarm—him whom I believed so sleepy!" he muttered. "He must have seen Bill and the Indians when they first came, arranged his blanket and hat as you found it, and crept over the hill. When I cautioned him to keep quiet, I told him how near and in what direction they were. I see it all. Green as I took him to be, he has outwitted us all!"

"It is so. This is his horse—a noble animal, too. We will take that with us."

"Of course; and we must hurry on, for Bill is miles on the trail already. He will be even more surprised than we when he knows how the Black Hillers got warning. I'll not give much for Mr. Pond's hair," said the Texan.

In a few seconds the horse which Addie had ridden was saddled and ready, and, leaving his pack-horse behind, but leading the Black Hawk, the young Texan, with Addie Neidic by his side, dashed at full speed over the valley, and out of the ravine.

Once out on the open plain, they could see far away to the west a cloud of dust. It was made by the Sioux under the White Elk, who were pushing the horses to their wildest speed on the trail of the fugitives. This trail the Texan and Addie Neidic followed at their utmost speed.

The double trail made by the Black Hillers and the pursuing Indians would have been plain indeed to follow had not the column of dust served as a guide.

With their horses at full speed, and better than the general run of Indian ponies, the Texan and his fair companion gained slowly but surely on the Indians, and within an hour had passed the rear of their column, and were pressing well to the front.

Yet it was noon when they ranged alongside of Persimmon Bill himself, and reported the discovery Addie Neidic had made.

"One more scalp ahead of us," was all he said, when he heard the report.

And he pressed on still faster.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNLOOKED-FOR AID.

With their heavily-laden pack-horses, lengthy as their start was, the party under Chichester saw their pursuers plainly in their rear before the day was two-thirds passed, and Captain Jack, hurrying up the rear all he could, sent word to Chichester that the reds were gaining rapidly.

Chichester sent word back to press the rear forward at its utmost speed. He could see timber ahead, and if they could only reach it, they might be able to make a stand. Satisfied, from the report of Willie Pond, that over one hundred well-armed and well-mounted Indians were on his trail, fearful that many of his men would flinch in battle, he dared not, with the few that were true, make a stand on the open plain.

Had all been like Wild Bill, California Joe, and Captain Jack, he would have halted, rested his horses, and given the reds battle rather than fly from even treble his number. But he knew well that a few cowards would weaken the rest, and he wanted to get some shelter before he met such odds.

The timber was yet fully two hours' ride distant, half of the pack-horses had given out and been left, and many of the mounted men complained that they could not keep their horses much longer in the column.

Sam Chichester had been obliged to slacken the pace in front, and the enemy were gaining so fast that the glitter of their arms could be seen even amid the dust-cloud that rose above them.

Suddenly another column of dust was seen, and this appeared to come from the direction of the timber, though south of the route the Black Hillers were taking.

"Men!" muttered Sam Chichester, "there's no use in our running much farther. If that new cloud of dust is made by Indians, all that we can do is to sell our lives as dearly as we can. We will soon know one thing or the other."

"They're not on the line we're taking. They can't be coming for us," said Captain Jack, who had ridden to the front. "They're coming in our flank."

"And night is coming, too," growled California Joe. "If we can keep on for two hours more, we'll have darkness to shield us, for no red will fight in the dark without he attacks, and has camp-fires to light up with."

"We'll keep them on while an animal will move, and when we must, turn and fight for life or vengeance, if we must go under," said Chichester. "Forward, men—forward once more!"

Again Captain Jack took the post of honor, for such indeed was the rear guard in this case. Suddenly, on looking back, he saw that the Indians, instead of gaining, had come to a halt.

"They've given it up! they've given it up!" he cried, sending a messenger forward to Captain Chichester to slacken the speed of the column.

It was now almost sundown, and the men in the column, choked and thirsty, weary beyond expression, could hardly believe the news was true. They were soon satisfied, though, that it was; but it was not for an hour yet, when twilight was beginning to gather, that they learned the real cause of their present safety.

The Indians would have been upon them before night set in, had they not first discovered the nature of the dust cloud to the south-west, or rather who it was raised by. The field-glass of the Texan, even miles and miles away, had detected the flutter of cavalry guidons amid the dust, and showed that mounted troops were near enough to come to the aid of the Black Hill men before they could be crushed and their scalps taken.

So, much against his will, Persimmon Bill was obliged to slacken his pace, and soon to turn his course, so, as by a night march, to put his warriors beyond the reach of those who might turn on them.

When night fell, Chichester, joined by two companies of cavalry, bound for the Hills, under orders to join forces already on the way by another route, moved slowly to a camping-ground in the timber, for which he had been heading hours back.

The horses of the troops were weak from scant forage, and the commanding officer did not feel it his duty to wear them out chasing Indians, though he held himself ready to protect the mining party as long as they remained with him.

And they were just too willing to go on with such an escort, even with the loss of all the pack animals left on their trail; and had Persimmon Bill only halted, instead of falling back, he would have found that there was no danger of pursuit.

Chichester and Crawford, when they compared notes, and found not a man of their party lost, though half its property was gone, felt satisfied that it was no worse, for at one time it seemed to both that nothing was left to them but to sell their lives as dearly as they could.

In a well-guarded camp all were settled before the moon rose, and never was rest more needed by animals and men.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE DEATH-TRAIL.

Bivouacked on the treeless plain, so far from the old trail and from the timber ahead that they could see no sign of the Black Hillers or the troops, the next morning's sun rose on the band of Sioux led by Persimmon Bill. Used to all kinds of exigencies, the red men did not mind either a lack of food or of water for so short a time. They were only angered with the thought that those whom they had deemed an easy prey had escaped them.

As soon as it was light, Persimmon Bill had the captured pack-horses examined, and it was found that several of them were laden with provisions. Others had ammunition and stores, and on some of them were found kegs of liquor.

These the wary leader at once destroyed, telling his followers that there was no foe so deadly to the red man as this fire-water, and not one drop should pass his lips or theirs. The provisions were at once distributed among them, as also the stores, but the liquor was given to the thirsty sands, where at least it could do no harm.

Then a council was held by the leader with the chiefs and head warriors of the band, and it was decided that it would be foolish to pursue the Black Hill people farther, now that troops were with them, unless a large band of Sioux could be found. For it is not Indian policy to risk battle against odds, or where

there is danger of great loss and little gain. To reach water and good hunting-grounds was their first necessity; after that they could consider where next to go. Sitting Bull was rallying all the tribes for war, and the "White Elk" had promised to join him.

Gloomily the young Texan heard all this talk, and at its close, when a decision had been arrived at, he said:

"Here we must part. I follow the trail of Wild Bill, if I follow it alone. I had hoped to see him die a slow and cruel death, where I could have heard him plead, and plead in vain for mercy. But that hope is gone, if he reaches the Hills in safety. But he cannot live—he shall not! I have sworn to kill him, and I will! The spirit of him who fell at Abilene cries up from a bloody grave for vengeance, and the cry shall be answered. You have been kind to me Addie Neidic, and so has he to whom your heart is given. I shall never forget it. But our courses now lie apart—I follow yonder trail, while you go I know not where. We may not meet again—if we do, I shall tell you Wild Bill is dead!"

"Stay with us. I will yet help you to your vengeance," said Persimmon Bill.

"No; it will be too long delayed. I am hot on the death-trail now, and I will not leave it. Fear not for me. I shall hover near them till they reach the Hills, and then I will not wait long to fulfill my work. When the deed is done, if I still think life is precious, and his friends press me too hard, I may look for safety, as you have done, with the Sioux."

"Come, and you shall find in me a sister, and in him a brother," cried Addie Neidic.

"A brother? I had one once," came in a low, sobbing cry from the young Texan's lips; then, with his head bowed, and scalding tears rolling down his cheeks, he drove the spurs into his horse, and sped away swiftly in the direction of the old trail.

The Black Hawk horse, saddled and bridled, but riderless, galloped on by the side of the Texan's fleet mustang, with no wish to part from his company.

"He had death in his eye! He will kill Wild Bill, and we shall never see him again," said Persimmon Bill. "The miners are rough, and condemn before they try, and hang as soon as condemnation is spoken. I pity the boy—for he is but a boy."

Addie Neidic smiled.

"We shall see your boy again," she said. "Something seems to whisper to me that his fate is in some way linked with ours. I, too, feel sure that he will kill Wild Bill, and then escape to join us. And you, my hero, will rise till all these Indian nations call you king. How these who follow you look up to you now, obeying every word or sign. And think, on these vast plains, and in the endless range of hills, valleys, and mountains, there must be countless thousands, who want but a daring, skillful leader to make them the best light troops in the world."

"You are ambitious for me, dearest," said Bill, with a strange, sad smile. "I hope to prove worthy of your aspirations. But we must move. I head now for the Big Horn Valley, to meet Sitting Bull."

CHAPTER XIX.

"SAVE, OH, SAVE MY HUSBAND!"

"Safe and in port at last, as old Cale Durg used to say, when a scout was over and he was back in garrison."

This was the joyous exclamation of Captain Jack Crawford, as he turned to Sam Chichester, when their party rode into the settlement at the Deadwood Mines in the Black Hills. Escorted nearly all the way by the cavalry they had so providentially met, they had been troubled no more by the Indians, and excepting the loss of some horses, and a part of their "fit-out" and stores, had suffered nothing. Not a man had been hurt, and best of all, they came in sober, for the benzine had all gone with the lost packs, for it was heaviest on the mules, as it would have been on the men, had it not been lost.

"I'm glad the trip is over. My temper never has been more tried," said Chichester. "The most of the men have had their own way, though when we started they promised on honor to obey me as captain. But honor is a scarce article with the majority of them. Now they're here, they'll go it with a looseness."

"You bet," was Crawford's sententious remark. "Wild Bill will be in his element. Look at the signs. Rum, faro, monté, all have a swing here, you can swear."

"Men, into line one minute, and then we part!" shouted Captain Chichester to his party.

For a wonder, with temptation on every side, the weary riders obeyed, and drew up in a straggling line to hear their leader's parting speech.

"Men, I promised to bring you here safely if I could, but to

get all of you here that I could, any way. I've kept my promise we're here."

"Ay! Three cheers for Sam Chichester!" shouted Wild Bill, The cheers were given, and Cluchester said:

"Thank you, boys. Now do me one favor. You are here in a busy place, and I see by the signs that benzine is about as plenty as water. Touch it light, and do behave yourselves, that my name will not be disgraced by any of Sam Chichester's crowd. Every man is his own master now, and must look out for himself. I wish you all good luck, and shall work hard for it myself."

The speech was over, and in a second the line melted away and every man was seeking quarters or pitching into the benzine shops.

Wild Bill would have been the first to go there, had not his companion, Willie Pond, said, in a low tone:

"Bill, please get quarters for you and me before you do anything else. You know what you have promised. Remember, if it had not been for me, neither you nor one of this party would ever have got here."

"You're right. But I'm so cussed dry!" muttered Bill. "You're right. I'll find housing for us two before a drop passes my lips."

And Bill rode on to the upper part of the town, as it might be called, where some men were putting up a new shanty, in fact, just putting the finishing touch on it by hanging a door.

"Will you sell that shebang?" asked Bill, of the man who seemed to be the head workman.

"Yes, if we get enough. We can build another. What will you give?"

"These two horses and a century," said Bill, pointing to the animals ridden by himself and companion, and holding up a hundred-dollar bill which Pond had furnished him.

"O. K. The house is yours!" said the man. "Boys, put for timber, and we'll have another up by eunset."

Bill and his companion dismounted, removed their blankets, arms, and saddle-bags into the house, gave up the horses and were at home. It did not take long to settle there.

* * * * *

Night had fallen on the town of Deadwood, but not the calm which generally comes with night where the laborer is but too glad to greet the hour of rest. Lights flashing through chinks in rude cabins, lights shimmering through canvas walls, songs, shouts, laughter, curses, and drunken yells made the place seem like a pandemonium on earth.

Almost every other structure, either tent, cabin, or more pretentious framed house, was either a saloon or gambling-hell, or both combined. And all these seemed full. The gulches, sinks, and claims that had been the scene of busy labor all the day were now deserted, and the gold just wrenched from the bowels of the earth was scattered on the gambling table, or poured into the drawer of the busy rumseller.

At this same hour, a man rode into the edge of the town on a noble black horse, leading a tired mustang. Both of these animals he staked out in a patch of grass, leaving the saddles on, and the bridles hanging to the saddle-bow of each. Then he placed his rifle against a tree near by, took the old cartridges out of a six-shooter and put in fresh ones. This done with the greatest deliberation, he pulled his slouch hat well over his face, entered the nearest saloon, threw down a silver dollar, and called for brandy.

A bottle and glass were set before him. He filled the glass to the brim, drank it off, and walked out.

"Here, you red-haired cuss, here!" cried the bar-keeper. "Here's a half comin' to you; we only charge half-price when it goes by wholesale!"

The joke fell useless, for the red-haired man had not remained to hear it.

In the largest hall in the place, a heavy gambling game was going on. There was roulette, faro, and monte, all at different points.

Before the faro-table there was the greatest gathering. Wild Bill, furnished with money by the person known to us so far as Willie Pond, was "bucking against the bank" with his usual wonderful luck, and the crowd centered around him as a character more noted and better known than any other who had yet come to Deadwood.

"I'll bet my whole pile on the jack!" shouted Wild Bill, who had taken enough strong drink to fit him for anything.

"Do be careful, Bill—do be careful!" said a low, kind voice just behind him.

It was that of Willie Pond. "Oh, go home and mind your business. I'll break this bank to-night, or die in the trial!" cried Bill, defiantly.

"You'll die before you break it!" shrieked out a shrill, sharp voice, and the red-haired Texan sprang forward with an uplifted bowie-knife, and lunged with deadly aim at Bill's heart, even as the person we have so long known as Willie Pond shrieked out:

"Save, oh, save my husband!"

But another hand clutched the hilt of the descending kn. the hand of a short, thickset, beetle-browed desperado, who shouted, as he drew a pistol with his other hand:

"Wild Bill is my game. No one living shall cheat me of my revenge! Look at this scar, Bill—you marked me for life, and now I mark you for death!"

And even as he spoke, the man fired, and a death-shot pierced Wild Bill's heart.

The latter, who had risen to his feet, staggered toward the Texan, who struggled to free his knife-hand from the clutch of the real assassin, and with a wild laugh, tore the false hair from the Texan's head. As a roll of woman's hair came down in a flood of beauty over her shoulders, Bill gasped out:

"Jack McCall, I'm thankful to you, even though you've killed me. Wild Bill does not die by the hand of a woman!"

A shudder, and all was over, so far as Wild Bill's life went.

His real and true wife wept in silence over his body, while sullen, and for a time silent, the supposed Texan stood and gazed at the dead body.

Then she spoke, addressing McCall:

"Villain, you have robbed me of my revenge! for by my hand should that man have fallen. No wrong he could have done you can be more bitter than that which put me on his death-trail, and made me swear to take his life."

"Two years ago a young man left a ranch close to the Rio Grande border with a thousand head of cattle, which had been bought from him, to be paid for when delivered in Abilene, Kansas. He was noble, brave, handsome. He was good and true in all things. He was the only hope of a widowed mother, the very idol of a loving sister, whose life seemed linked with his. He promised when he left those he loved and who so loved him, that he would hasten back with the proceeds of the sale, and then, with his mother and sister, he would return to the birth-place of the three, to the old Northern homestead, where his father's remains were buried, buy the old estate, and settle down to a quiet and a happy life. Long, anxiously, and prayerfully did that mother and sister wait for his return. Did he come? No; but the soul-blighting news came, which, like a thunder-bolt, struck that mother—my mother—dead! Wild and despairing, I heard it—heard this.

"The son, the brother, who never used a drop of strong drink in all his life; who never uttered an oath, or raised a hand in unkindness to man or woman, had been murdered—killed without provocation—no chance to defend his life, no warning to prepare for another world—shot down in mere wantonness. There lies the body of him who did it. Do you wonder that, over my dead mother's body, girl though I was, I swore to follow to the death him who killed my brother? It is not my fault that I have not kept my oath. I would have done it had I known that you, his friends, would have torn me limb from limb before his body was cold."

"And served him right!" said an old miner, whose eyes were dimmed with moisture while the Texan girl told her story.

"Where is McCall? His act was murder," cried Sam Chichester.

"He has sloped, but I'll take his trail, and if there is law in Montana he shall hang," said California Joe, who bounded from the house, when it was discovered that the murderer had slipped away in the moment of excitement.

How well California Joe kept his promise, history has already recorded. Followed over many a weary mile of hill and prairie, McCall was finally arrested, tried and convicted, as well by his own boast as the evidence of others, and he was hanged.

But one glance at our heroine, for such the red-haired Texan is.

With a look of haughty defiance, she asked:

"Have I done aught that requires my detention here?"

"No," said Captain Jack; "thank Heaven you have not. We'd make a poor fist at trying a woman by Lynch law, if you had done what you meant to."

"Then I go, and few will be the white faces I ever see again!" she cried.

The next moment she passed out, and as the crowd followed to see whither she went, she was seen to spring on a coal-black horse which stood unhitched before the door, and on it she rode at wild speed away toward the north-west, while a saddled but unriden mustang followed close behind her.

The course she took led toward the regions where Sitting Bull, in force, awaited the attack of the soldiers then on his trail.

[THE END.]

DIME NOVELS
BOUGHT & SOLD
CHARLES BRAGIN
1525 W. 12th St.
Brooklyn 4. N. Y.

"DIAMOND DICK, JR.'S TRUNK CHECK; OR, THE MAN IN THE SILVER MASK," by W. B. LAWSON, will be published in the next number (193) of the DIAMOND DICK LIBRARY.

